

Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my requirements during my four years of seminary education was to spend a summer as a chaplain in an institutional setting, such as a hospital. If you chat with any of our seminary interns or newly-ordained Pastor Jim Dunlop, they can tell you of the tremendous learning experience of what is called CPE—Clinical Pastoral Education. My CPE site was Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown. It was and still is a critical care hospital where trauma victims are often life-flighted in on the hospital's Medi-vac helicopter. A place where patients and families truly need someone to be there for them any hour of the day turning times of medical crisis. And so, just as Joe Friday carried a badge, I carried a beeper that summer . . . for 12 long weeks.

By the 6th week of CPE, I hated the sound of that beeper. I detested its high-pitched shriek—that shrill blast for which I was never prepared, suddenly erupting out of the silence. That sound didn't bother me in the daytime. In the hustle and bustle that was Lehigh Valley Hospital, the paging system was part of the normal din. The most familiar of all gestures was employed whenever a beeper went off in that cafeteria. Doctors, nurses, technicians and chaplains alike would hear that sound, lift pager to ear, all at the same time, like a religious ritual of great significance, attempting to find out if they were the individual being paged.

But at night, with the hallway lights dimmed, with murmuring at unit desks, the soft padding of shoes on the floor—well, **that's** when I hated the sound of the beeper . . . because I knew the call couldn't possibly be anything good. What I was being called to could be a code blue on one of the med-surg floors. My role was to calm the anxious roommate while behind a thin curtain, the code team was applying electric shock paddles to the other patient, attempting to get their heart started again. Or, I was being called to the emergency room to meet with yet another family of yet another motorcycle accident victim. No—sometimes I had to help the emergency staff figure out who the victim **was** so that family could be contacted. I remember one night my job was to go through a blood-soaked wallet, peeling away layer upon layer of cards and money and scraps of paper until I found an ID with information on next-of-kin. Then I called them, and I was there was they arrived at the hospital, and they would have to decide what to do since he was brain-dead.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be a chaplain. I wanted to minister where I could, sharing God's love. But I remember hoping that the beeper wouldn't go off the nights I was on call. I'd stare it down, willing it to be silent. I wanted it to be mute—no one hurt, no one dying. The night was dark enough without my having to enter someone else's darkness.

Which of us wants to enter that darkness? That's part of our sinful nature, you know—we want to stay in the light, we want to remain in situations where things are easy, carefree. Where we don't feel burdened by someone else's problems (Lord knows we have enough of our own!). Don't get me wrong—we all have moments of true compassion, but we tend to schedule them to fit our lifestyles. We pass someone on the street and say, "Hi, how's it going?" But we don't really mean that. (Isn't there this unwritten rule that you don't truly answer the question, "How's it going?" Not honestly, anyway.) In fact, we don't stop for the answer—our aerobic stride is unbroken. We expect the answer to be: "I'm fine!" What we

don't want to hear is, "Gee, funny you should ask how it's going. It's going lousy. My hips are really hurting me. I'm worried about my husband's job, and the school taxes came in the mail and I'm not sure we can pay them."

Why is it we're like that? We're simply too busy and too burdened by our own life's struggles? Maybe. And maybe we're afraid to enter too far into someone else's pain because then **we'll** feel their pain. And **even** maybe we're reluctant to enter that darkness and pain because we're afraid we can't do anything about it anyway. We who always seek productive outcomes and results discover we don't have the magic formula to heal their brokenness, take away the hurt.

So we excuse ourselves with some handy theological jargon, reminding ourselves that God's forgiveness will get us off the hook: "I know I should reach out to my neighbor more. I know I'm commanded to love my neighbor. But I just can't do it today. I'll do it tomorrow. The good thing is, I'm forgiven by God, justified by grace through faith." A little knowledge is indeed a dangerous thing.

And thus, assured of God's gracious mercy, we continue in the same behaviors, one of which is ignoring the sound of beepers going off—the cries of people around us who struggle with the burden of problems they cannot shoulder by themselves. We continue to live lives isolated from the community of brothers and sisters into which we've been called in our Baptism. We continue to concentrate on ourselves and our needs and wants.

I figure poor St. Paul must have had his hands full with people just like us. There he was, trying to keep all those fledgling congregations going, bringing them back to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ when they strayed, working to move them beyond those same old behaviors, those same lame excuses that we use today to avoid living a new and generous life in Christ.

He had to respond with faithfulness and vigor to every question they formulated—and they were asking those common questions we humans come up with all the time when we wish to manipulate God's mercy for our own purposes.

Our lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans today includes one manipulative question being asked in Paul's time: "Should we continue to sin so that God's grace and mercy will abound?" Translate that as "Can't we just live the status quo? Can't we just be the way we've always been? If God promises an everlasting mercy, a steadfast love, and if it's by his grace we're saved anyway, why should we change?"

For nearly 2,000 years we have used God's willingness to redeem us through Christ to excuse ourselves for leading sinful lives. Every time you and I ignore another human's hurts, and every time you and I walk down the other side of the street to avoid dealing with injustice, and every time you and I pretend that poverty and domestic abuse and addiction and mental illness don't exist in our corner of the world—then you and I are living that status quo which allows us to neglect our human family and discard Christ's command to serve rather than be served, to lose ourselves rather than become absorbed in ourselves.

God's willingness to redeem us through the self-giving of his Son Jesus was born out of the foundation of his eternal love for us, and his desire to have us be forever part of his good creation. So he knows the count of the hairs on our heads, and he knows when a tiny sparrow falls—nothing escapes his view, or is beyond his capacity to redeem. But he **also**

calls you and me to live Christ-like lives where we will care when a sparrow falls, where we will be concerned that our brother or sister might be vulnerable or suffering. He even gives us the power of his Holy Spirit that we might notice and respond.

It was the 11th week of my CPE experience. I was on call again for the duration of the night, staring that beeper down. To no avail. It called me to the bedside of Carmen Fasnacht. A woman in her '60's, she suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), where her muscles gradually weakened and atrophied. The prognosis was grave. Death usually came to the victim within 3-5 years, mostly when the muscles used for breathing became paralyzed. Carmen was in a later stage of the disease. She couldn't talk, and an oxygen mask was strapped on her face.

A floor nurse told me Carmen almost never slept at night. For Carmen, the darkness and the silence of the unit were too horrible. Carmen would panic, her eyes wide with terror at her isolation. She'd struggle to remove her mask, and then struggle even more to breathe. The nurses were at their wits' end trying to calm her down and still tend a busy floor full of other patients. "Would you go and sit with Carmen for a little while?" they asked. And so I did. I read a Psalm or two for her. She seemed to appreciate that. I offered prayer for her—she accepted that, too. I was trying to do that "pastor-ish" thing that my collar indicated I was to do.

But mostly, we held hands in the darkness of that room. When all the nice chaplain-like words died from my lips, when there was nothing else to say, I was left with simply holding her hand. All the old fears welled up in me: Was I helping her at all?

Guess what? I believe the Holy Spirit empowered me, not in the words I spoke, but in the darkness I entered with her. The Spirit gave me the strength just to be with her. As I watched Carmen's face from the dim light of the hallway, I saw her begin to relax. Her wide-eyed terror, her struggling with her oxygen mask, her muted but frantic mouthing of words all subsided. It had to have been the work of the Spirit. Remember, I was the one who dreaded the sound of that pager. I was as reluctant and fearful of the night, and as anxious for light as Carmen. But God called me to her. That contraption with its shrill cry I so despised was the voice for voiceless Carmen. And we sat in that darkness, hand holding hand, our silent communion, each of us journeying along with our own frailties. Except that this time it was clear God was with us in the journey. He who knew the number of hairs on each of our heads was holding us both, together.

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? No, says Paul. He writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism in to death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might walk in newness of life."

God graciously linked me, this scared little seminary student, with a scared, wasted woman. As Carmen and I held hands, God was reminding me that I live in community with others who desperately need the love of God, and I am called to enter the darkness to share it with them.

Beepers will sound off many times in our day-to-day lives. We'll learn of the needs of the people around us. And we'll have the same old fears, the same lame excuses. We'll desire to remain unchanged, in the status quo. But Paul says our day-to-day lives are now and forever bound up in Christ, who was dead and lives again, and **he** is at work bestowing new life on us all. **AMEN.**

