Sermon: Cancer as a Teacher
February 15, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

I invite you here in our time together to center yourself in your body. Breathe in and out. Be aware of your body in this space, the top of your head, your jaw, your shoulders. Let your belly expand, feel your hips, your thighs, knees, ankles, the bottoms of your feet, your fingertips This whole marvelous being that is you, mind, body and soul. Give thanks for your body and its wonders.

I want to thank you over the course of these past several Sundays for coming with me on a journey to explore the spiritual themes of illness and wellness. It is not easy to face the fact that all of us will become sick eventually and will die eventually. We need a constant reminder, I think, even though it is the one universal of the human experience. I have a sticker on my bulletin board in my office that says we all die with beautiful flowers around it. It's a little startling to see it every time, even though it is so obviously true. Understanding this makes our lives all the more precious, every single day. I've preached about mental illness and the importance of acceptance of all of us, in all of our states of mental wellness and illness. I've preached about disability and the importance of access and justice.

This morning, I want to talk about cancer. Even as mortality decreases, it is still one of the two leading causes of death in the US. I think it is a diagnosis that still sparks fear and uncertainty, when we get it, or when a family member experiences cancer.

Cancer Research has produced remarkable results in recent decades. It is no longer a death sentence. Many cancers have become survivable through early detection, new medicines, vaccines, and immunotherapy. Still, I believe cancer has wisdom to teach us. If we can set aside our fear and hear what it has to say. Cancer has touched all of our lives, I'm certain of that, looking out here at this congregation. I want to share with you the stories of three women whose lives and deaths from cancer have stayed with me and touched my life. I have learned spiritual lessons from them, from their illness and their lives and their deaths, their resilience, their souls that live on in me, the Spirit in them that death has not overcome.

The first woman whose story I want to share with you was Myrtle. She was my maternal grandmother, and I never knew her. She died of leukemia in 1968. My mother was the oldest of four children. My mother was 16 at the time. The fullness of this family story only came out to me and my brother after my own mother had died. I knew that Myrtle had died of cancer in 1968. I knew that it had been a swift illness and that there was not a therapy that could help her at that time. But what I learned more recently is that her own children didn't know that she had cancer. They didn't know that she might die when she went into the hospital for what turned out to be the final time. They didn't know, that she was that sick or that there was any chance of their mother not coming home. What I even learned more recently is that she herself did not know, did not know the extent of her illness or what she was facing. At that time, it was thought that women didn't necessarily need to know all the scary details of a diagnosis. That certainly children didn't need to be burdened with that knowledge, even though it deprived them of a chance to say goodbye to their mother.

In fact, it was even thought that it was probably too much for my grandfather to raise these four children on his own, and he was worried after Myrtle's death that the children would be taken away from him. He was determined that that would not happen, that he would keep his family together and be there for his children. At that time, there was so much fear and shame around a cancer diagnosis. It was this still somewhat new, mysterious illness that had no treatment and certainly no cure. Before breakthroughs of vaccines and antibiotics at the beginning of the 20th century many people did not live long enough to be diagnosed with cancer. So as the 20th century progressed, and death from other illnesses became rarer, death from cancer became more common, yet completely untreatable at that time. Because of that, there was a lot of shame, and also in this story, misogyny around the understanding and treatment of cancer. Something that I keep with me from the Myrtle story is that shame never has anything good to do for us. It doesn't help.

The experience of illness tends to pull us away from life. It makes us feel like we are contagious, even if we don't have a contagious illness, it makes us feel a little bit less than human. It is isolating, and shame just compounds that. Makes it feel like we can't talk about this illness. We can't talk about it within the family. We can't talk about it with friends and those around us.

Another person, whose writing I have read, described cancer as her own diagnosis of cancer, as though she had always, throughout her life, just been flying with no way to be flying through the air, unable to worry about it, because there were clouds

between her and the ground below her. The cancer diagnosis cleared away those clouds, and all of a sudden she's like, wait a minute, how am I flying? I'm going to fall. I'm going to die here. It's that fear, that sudden knowledge of the fact that we are, in fact, all going to die in this moment with this diagnosis, I might die of this. That can separate us if we think all the other people around us are still comfortable in their illusion of safety and shame just compounds that feeling. The more that we can share our feelings, the more that we can share our fear of mortality and our experience of illness, the more human it keeps us in our relationship to one another. Even when we are sick, we are in the kingdom of the living. Being honest about our illness, what we need, what would help, connects us to others.

We have left some medical misogyny behind in the 1960s and I hope that we can leave that pain behind us as well. Some of that shame has been left behind. Cancer Research has required enormous funding worldwide. The drive to raise those funds, especially for breast cancer research, has helped bring cancer more into the public consciousness, make it something that people can talk about with each other, without fear or shame. With awareness comes understanding, and a release from that burden of loneliness.

The next person whose story I want to share was a member of the church I served in New Hampshire. Her name was Carol. She was an African American woman born in 1930 in Miami, Florida, in the Jim Crow South. She joined the Air Force as a pathway to escape that life and do what she wanted to do with her life. In the Air Force, she began to learn to program computers on punch cards. That was the beginning of her career as an IT professional.

In fact, I just recently learned she recorded a video about her own life, and her daughter just shared that with me. It was only to be seen in the event that she had died. She died more than 10 years ago, but I just got this video this week. She says in the video that she turned down a college scholarship that she received when she was in high school without telling her mother. Because the college scholarship was to be a teacher, one of the acceptable jobs for women at the time, and she did not want to be a teacher. So she quietly set that college scholarship aside and joined the Air Force as soon as she had graduated from high school. With the training that she received in the Air Force, she rose to be an executive in IT, in private industry.

When I knew her, in her retirement, she served as a state rep in New Hampshire. She was a formidable leader in the church and a loving mother and grandmother. And when she was in her 70s, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She went through surgery and chemotherapy. While undergoing one of her chemotherapy treatments during the week, in between the treatments, she sat down on her basement steps and died.

Carol's life taught me more than her death. Her vision for how consistent effort and moral courage can make the world a better place. I saw in her approach to cancer, the same approach that she had brought to her whole life. This is an obstacle that I can overcome. Science and family and medicine will help me. I will work to overcome this illness. Human existence is contingent, I saw in her, but I also saw that it is worthwhile and worth fighting for. She chose difficulty and even pain because she saw a pathway to a better life ahead of her.

Yet, as we all must, Carol died. Cancer treatment can be brutal. I don't wish that she had made a different choice. I understand that choice for her, and I also understand the choice not to go through painful or difficult treatments for cancer.

Alongside treatments for cancer at the end of the 20th century, medicine developed rest from treatments and the pain and suffering they can cause. Palliative medicine was developed in England after World War II by Cicely Saunders, a nurse and physician in England. She created palliative medicine to treat pain and dehumanizing symptoms in terminally ill patients. One nurse who worked with her said, doctors would not even look us in the eye when we recommended that they stop their efforts to save lives and start saving dignity instead. Cicely Saunders said, in many ways, the principles of palliative medicine are fundamentally the same as those which underlie all other stages of care and treatment, although its rewards are different.

And this is the choice made by the last woman I want to tell you about today. Marsha was also a member of the church I served in New Hampshire. Again, when she was in her 70s, she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Long ago, she had been a smoker. She was a person whose lung cancer might have been caused by smoking or by environmental causes. She went through one round of debilitating treatment, and then decided that that would be it for her. She entered hospice care and stayed with her sister for the last six weeks of her life. And during that time, she welcomed friends to visit her. The choir of the church went to her sister's house and sang for her. She ate

the food that she loved best. She received the care she needed not to be in pain during that time. She died about six weeks after she stopped her treatment.

I'm grateful for that choice, that both Carol and Marshall had. A choice that respected their humanity and their dignity as people. A choice to either undergo treatment even though it would be painful, or a choice to say no to treatment in order to be able to enjoy the amount of life that a person had left.

I’m grateful for hospice care and palliative care. These branches of medicine treat suffering, sometimes instead of curative treatments and sometimes alongside them. I'm grateful for oncology and research into preventions.

The last wisdom that I take from Marsha's story is the importance of care for human and animal life by caring for the environment. Cancer is a reflection of the world we live in. In a way, cancer inscribes the environment on our bodies. You may know that it was a battle to make clear the connection between lung cancer and cigarette smoking. The tobacco industry put up an enormous fight against making that connection clear. Yet, the very first scientists to publish that connection in that very same paper described the correlation between lung cancer and environmental pollution. The closer someone lived to a major roadway, and by extension, polluted air, the more likely they were to have lung cancer. Today, according to oncologist and writer, Siddhartha Mukherjee, non-smoking related lung cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer related mortality, globally.

So for all my gratitude for how doctors and researchers treat individuals and populations, I hope we could all come together as a society beyond the discipline of

medicine, to treat the earth. The suffering in our bodies tells us that the earth is suffering.

Prevention begins with the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat. Cancer cells are cells in our bodies that refuse to mature. Instead of growing into functioning lung, breast or cancer cells, they simply reproduce without taking on the work of their mature cousins.

I can't help but see a parallel to the earth. If we produce and produce, consume and consume, without maturity and responsibility for our behavior, our behavior will overrun the Earth and its resources. We all as a society need to do that same learning, to mature in our relationship with the Earth and the resources it provides us. In memory of Marsha, Carol and Myrtle, in memory of your loved ones, in honor of all who are living with cancer right now, may we make changes for our earth that create a better future for all. I love you all.