

Living With Care

From the sermon series: Lifelines

Text: Isaiah 42: 3, 6; Matthew 9: 36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Having entered the circle of those whose life span has reached the half century mark, I have been thinking about life and decided that it would be a good time to have a thorough checkup, to get a reading on the present condition of this "house" I live in. A stress test was suggested, but I responded that I have one of those every day. Having been blessed with good health, I am not one that gives much thought to my physical body and I am quite sure I do not take care of it as I should.

That is a confession.

I certainly affirm the attention given to physical health in our day. Wellness is in and that is good; that is biblical, for our Judeo-Christian faith affirms the body and Paul speaks of proper regard for the body since it is the Temple of the Spirit.

Proper eating, rest, exercise - all of that is important, and we could no doubt develop a series of lectures entitled "Lifelines" which would deal with the various disciplines by which good physical health is maintained.

There is a high level of consciousness about health matters. In Times Square last week I saw the brilliant neon signs for Sony, Minolta and Tobishi, and sandwiched in there somewhere was a new weight control diet plan advertised in glittering colors. I noticed it on my way to Mama Leone's, where I had a seven-course dinner.

I have been setting before us in this series of messages another set of lifelines - spiritual disciplines by which to enhance the spiritual dimension of our human existence.

Do not misunderstand me, please! I would not want to set physical and spiritual over against each other. We are not "souls" and "bodies," compartmentalized so that we can deal with the one in isolation from the other. Neither should we choose to cultivate the spiritual and deprecate the physical, or vice versa.

However, the lifelines I have been speaking about are spiritual disciplines through the exercise of which we deepen the spiritual life and cultivate the presence of God in our lives, thereby enticing the fullest, richest of human experience.

Physical wellness has caught on; it has become with some even an obsession. Spiritual wellness (or fullness) is more difficult to "sell"; there is a great lack of spiritual discipline among us in the Church, let alone the population in general.

This morning in Louisville, at the Human Heart Institute, the third person will undergo surgery to receive an artificial heart. Such medical experimentation is inevitable; we will continue to push back the horizons and establish new frontiers in medical science. I do not speak against that or call it into question. However, when we remember Barney Clark and when we see what William Schroeder has gone through, it must be abundantly clear that there is a sharp distinction between extension of physical existence, and quality of life.

The stages we are going through are the only way to progress in our capacity to extend and enhance life, but it is obvious that extension is not synonymous with enhancement. One thing is certain: we will never beat out the Grim Reaper; we may stave off death, but it is only a matter of time.

How important it then is that we get things in proper perspective. Might we not be giving our attention, time, energy and resources to the preservation of what we can never finally keep while failing to develop that which we will never lose? Life in the biblical sense, in the ultimate sense, is more than a beating heart.

Jesus said,

*I have come, that they may have Life, and have it more abundantly.
(John 10:10)*

Again he said,

This is eternal life; to know Thee Who alone art truly God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent. (John 17:3)

The life Jesus spoke of is eternal life and that is not some esoteric existence after death, but a present possibility, a present reality. Eternal life is here and now, living in communion with God through Jesus Christ.

The spiritual disciplines I have been setting before you in this series are not ends in themselves; they are means to the end of life in relationship with God. They are forms and structures by which we may practice the presence of God. Spiritual disciplines give us access to abundant life: life which is full, deep, rich; life which is truly human, fully alive.

Spiritual disciplines practiced in the course of our present existence develop communion with God that robs death of its sting and makes it but a point of transition to a form of existence in the presence of God of which present experience is but a foretaste and foregleam.

As I have indicated before, Jesus is our model. Paul prayed for the Galatian Christians

"until you take the shape of Christ."

In Jesus, God revealed Himself - we see who God is. In Jesus, God revealed His intention for human existence.

To this point in this Lifelines series, we have suggested:

1. We must intentionally begin - commitment.
2. We must yield to God's grace, which transforms us from people of the clenched fist to people of the open hand.
3. We must present ourselves in regular appointment in the corporate worship of God with His people - living with wonder.
4. We must daily open our lives to Him and cultivate His presence -living in dialogue.

Finally, let me suggest that we must become involved with God's mission in the world:

5. *We must live with care.*

Care is an interesting word. It has taken on various meanings. To be full of care may mean to be burdened with worry and anxiety. Such care Jesus said is lack of trust. He would have us care-free, not care-full.

We also use it in the sense of "Do you care if ..." Does it matter to you, in other words, and we may respond, "No, I don't care ..." Sometimes in that sense we communicate indifference.

I am using care in another sense. I use it here to convey just the opposite of indifference. I am suggesting that *God calls us to live with passionate concern and sensitivity to our neighbor and with a sense of responsibility for our world.*

Just as I began this series with a theme – Commitment, which was not itself a discipline but the prior decision to cultivate a disciplined life, so I end not with a specific discipline but rather with the fruit of such discipline - a life engaged in mission, a life of care. This is extremely important.

We do not cultivate the spiritual life simply to turn in on ourselves; we are not content simply to develop our own soul as though we lived an isolated human

existence. That, in fact, is a contradiction: if we are isolated, we are not fully human.

God created us for Himself and each other. We are created for community - a fully human existence is a life in relationship with God, and with neighbor. The highest, richest, fullest human existence is a life drawn out of itself, lived with care for the world and all God's children.

The best of spiritual directors have seen this clearly. There is an *inward journey* - the cultivation of a personal spiritual life. There must be an *outward journey*, the moving out in compassion to the world.

The two journeys must be engaged in simultaneously. It is not the case that we can become spiritual masters and then begin to serve in the Kingdom. Training for Kingdom service is "hands on" training. It is as we engage in the mission of Christ in the world that we are driven deeper into the spiritual life and as we deepen the spiritual springs of the soul we will be driven out into the world in the cause of Christ.

Inward journey. Outward journey.

In worship and personal devotion we find our lives transformed into the posture of the open hand and we enter the arena of service. Such service requires regular maintenance of our spiritual life and thus we seek grace and power in worship and devotion.

In Israel there is a classic example of what I am addressing in this message. From the heights of Mount Herman and surrounding mountain ranges fresh water flows into the Jordan River. When in the Holy Land, we came down from the Golan Heights and stopped at a small bridge over the sparkling, fresh, flowing water of the Jordan. We also took a boat trip on the lovely Sea of Galilee. The Jordan flows out of Galilee at its south end. The sea is still fished as it was in Jesus' day. The water is sweet. The Jordan flows south and empties into the Dead Sea. It is called the Dead Sea because of its heavy saline content. It is also called the Salt Sea. It is heavy with mineral content. I swam in the Dead Sea and could not submerge myself. One bobs on the surface like a cork. Surrounding the Dead Sea it is wilderness, a desert, stark and barren. The water is useless for irrigation; it cannot make the desert bloom.

What is the difference? It is the same water.

The difference is that the Dead Sea has no outlet; there is nowhere for the water to go and thus it becomes stagnant. It brings death rather than life. The Sea of Galilee is fresh, supporting life, watering the countryside and making it fruitful. The Dead Sea is stagnant, devoid of life, leaving the area a wilderness.

The Sea of Galilee both receives and gives.

The Dead Sea takes in but has no outlet. And that is a parable of human existence. Through the cultivation of spiritual discipline we receive spiritual grace and power. Through caring ministry, grace and power flow through us to the world and our lives are fresh, vital, fruitful. God calls us to be channels of grace, conduits of love, instruments of peace, caregivers.

This is so central a biblical teaching that I need only point you to the lessons of the day. The Old Testament lesson, Isaiah 42:1-7, is one of the so-called Servant Songs and response. The Servant Songs of Isaiah portray the mission of one who proclaims the Good News of God, suffers and finally gives his life in carrying out his service for God. Biblical scholars have pointed out that sometimes the Servant seems to be an individual, sometimes a corporate personality, thus representing Israel in its calling to be God's special instrument of salvation to the world. One commentary states it thus:

The servant is conceived as an individual figure, but he is the figure who recapitulates in himself all the religious gifts and the religious mission of Israel ... He is the fullness of Israel; in him the history of Israel reaches its achievement. He incorporates the dominant features of Israel's past; he has some of the traits of a new Moses: he is the spokesman of divine revelation, he is the witness of the divinity of Yahweh to Israel and to the nation; he is a prophet. (The Anchor Bible, *Servant Israel*, p. LIII)

Further, he writes,

The Servant poems are not "predictions" of the future in the simple sense. They are rather insights into the future, into the ways of God with men, a projection of how judgment and salvation must be realized if they are to be realized at all. For the community to whom the Songs were addressed, they are a challenge to a commitment, to a faith in a future, which is revealed in the figure of the Servant. Unless Israel accepts the Servant as its incorporation, it cannot keep faith with Yahweh. (*Ibid.*, p. LV)

Chapter 42 presents the Servant. God's Spirit is on him and he "will make justice shine on the nation." His manner will be one of tenderness and compassion.

He will not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smoldering wick.

He will bring God's teachings to the world. The word in Hebrew is *torah*, which we usually translate as law, but which does not mean law in the narrow sense of legal code but "way of life." It really means here "revelation." The Servant brings the revelation of the Truth of God to the Nations. He does so not in great public display with noisy ostentation, but quietly with sensitivity, setting forth the light of God's truth in the world's darkness.

The response to the Song in verses 5-9 sets forth clearly that God, the Creator, has called Israel to be His special agent to bring light and salvation to the world, to establish justice and create order in creation. Listen to this clear call:

I, the Lord, have called you with righteous purpose and taken you by the hand; I have formed you, and appointed you to be a light to all peoples, a beacon for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of prison, out of the dungeons where they be in darkness.

Called. Formed. Appointed. Israel's mission is unmistakably clear. She is God's elect people. God called one nation to bring light and salvation to all nations. Election is to service. It is both privilege and responsibility. Israel was God's special People; its mission was to be a beacon for the nations.

Israel failed in its mission. The whole of Old Testament history was reduced to a righteous remnant, finally to Jesus.

Jesus found the model for his ministry in the Servant Songs. He adopted the posture of the Servant of the Lord. He became the Suffering Servant. He finally died vicariously for the sin of the world, bringing salvation to the world. Jesus fulfilled the ideal of the Servant.

Matthew, in our New Testament lesson, pictures him in his healing ministry. In 9:21-22 the Greek word *Sozein* is used three times in regard to the woman who touched his garment. She was healed. She was "saved." Jesus came to save, to heal, to make whole. He came to restore order and unity to God's creation.

In this context he gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and life to the dead. Jesus' miracles were not for the sake of sensationalism; rather they were signs of the presence of the Kingdom, the rule of God. They were signs pointing to the new order, the new Creation. God's presence and power were mediated through the life and ministry of Jesus.

Our text paints a beautiful portrait of the Saviour. Matthew gives us a summary statement after citing miracle after miracle. He writes:

So Jesus went round all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the Kingdom, and curing every kind of ailment and disease. The sight of the people moved him to pity: they were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless...

The sight of the people moved Jesus to compassion. He saw the multitude and sensed their confusion: sheep without a shepherd, harassed, helpless. His life was a gift to people; He proclaimed the Truth.

One translation reads instead of "announcing the good news of the Kingdom," "proclaiming the Freedom of the Kingdom." He brought the truth that set persons free. He brought wholeness to persons: sight, hearing, health - life itself.

Thus the highest ideal of Old Testament insight - the calling to be the Servant of the Lord - found its embodiment, its fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus.

If, then, Jesus is our model, if we are to take on the shape of Christ, we will not only imitate him in his life of communion, but we will follow him in his life of service. Like Jesus, we are called *to live with care*. The care with which we are called to live is as broad as the world and as personal as our neighbor. Obviously I am using care in the sense of concern and compassion that draws us out of ourselves, our private lives and personal pursuits.

To live with care is to acknowledge that I am my brother's keeper; that the experience of the grace of God makes me, with St. Paul, a debtor to all, responsible to share the Gospel. To live with care means, again to cite St. Paul, "to look to each other's interest and not merely to your own."

To live with care means to accept responsibility for the world, for the cause of justice and the doing of righteousness; it means to be engaged in the great issues that confront the world and society; to be informed and to exercise whatever influence one has in the network of one's relationships to work for and speak for truth and right and mercy.

Let me draw from today's Scripture two dimensions of caring which find expression both in the Servant Song of Isaiah and the Gospel reading.

First, to care is to proclaim the truth, to witness to the revelation God has given, to announce Good News, to share the message of freedom through the liberating action of God.

This the Servant was called to do.

"... the islands wait for his teaching."

"To be a light to all peoples, a beacon for the nations."

This Jesus did; he taught.

"... teaching ... announcing the good news."

This we are called to do. We are the People of God, the new Israel, the Body of Christ, the extension of the Incarnation. We have been given the knowledge of God's revelation in the face of Jesus. We have learned of His redemptive acts and we have experienced His grace. Therefore we are called to witness to the Truth.

We must do this with proper humility and deep sensitivity. We must not do so with arrogance in a proud spirit. Only out of gratitude and the awe that God should have been merciful to us do we in turn witness to the truth we have found in Christ Jesus.

It is our conviction that God has revealed Himself supremely in Jesus and that His grace is extended to the world through Jesus. This does not deny that there is truth, goodness and beauty beyond the Christian Church. There is no need to deny that God's saving intention and action reaches beyond the bounds of the Church as we know it. It is to say, however, that His last word is Jesus. Jesus is the Truth that sets people free.

All religions are not alike. One is not as good as another. The Gospel is liberating. That's why one can translate Matthew 9:35 announcing the Freedom of the Kingdom.

The Servant's posture was one of humility. His approach filled with compassion, he did not break the bruised reed. But he faithfully bore witness to the Truth.

My knowledge and understanding of world religions is limited and a religion can be understood fully only from within. Yet I am convinced that the Christian Gospel is the Truth that sets people free. The Gospel is a liberating Truth that changes human life and society. Where the Gospel has made its impact felt, there has resulted a humanization of society. It is still happening around the world and there is still great need for the worldwide witness to Jesus Christ.

We call people not to religion; they have religion. We call them to the Way of Life.

In our world this calls for greater sensitivity than ever before and the difficulties of bearing witness to God's grace are more complex than ever given the nature of today's world scene with ideological conflict and revolutionary ferment, especially since we are a world power seeking to maintain the status quo. Thus it is so very critical that the Christian Church claim its own identity as the People of God who are called to mission - a mission that will witness to God's truth both in our own nation and beyond - to the whole world.

That's why the Catholic Bishops are doing what they are doing in publishing pastoral letters on subjects like nuclear warfare and economics. Differ with their conclusions, if you will, but recognize their responsibility to bear witness in that arena, for God has called, formed and appointed His people to be light to the people and a beacon to the Nations.

This is why Desmond Tutu, newly appointed bishop in South Africa, speaks against the apartheid policy of that nation. It is the Church's calling to confront injustice and oppression.

I could go on. The People of God are called to care and caring equals costly engagement, concern for the Truth, for justice and righteousness and a commitment to tell the story and announce the liberating Truth of the Gospel.

Secondly, to care is to touch and heal.

The ministry of Jesus bears eloquent testimony to the care that flowed from him: Sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, the lame walked, the dead were raised. Captives in all sorts of human bondage were set free.

It is not without good cause that Jesus has been called "The Man For Others." Compassion flowed forth from him to all he met. He responded to the slightest spark of faith and never turned away from human need. He was moved with compassion as he looked on the multitude.

So often we are moved with anger; we look with disgust at the action of the rebellious youth, the revolutionary, the poor and oppressed. Or, perhaps worse, we are indifferent, apathetic. We are hardened to human suffering; we become numb. We can wall ourselves off from the monstrous hurt of the masses and our neighbor. Non-involvement is the easy way out.

Jesus cared. Jesus reached out and touched. Jesus brought healing and wholeness to human lives burdened with despair and futility.

We stand on the threshold of Lent. We have a new opportunity to find the fullness of life to which he calls us. It will take intentionality - commitment. It will involve opening up and sharing, worshiping together, seeking God's presence in solitude, and a movement out of ourselves - a determination to care through costly involvement.

Living with care is living at its best. Nothing can bring greater joy, deeper satisfaction.

To care is to be - fully human, fully alive!