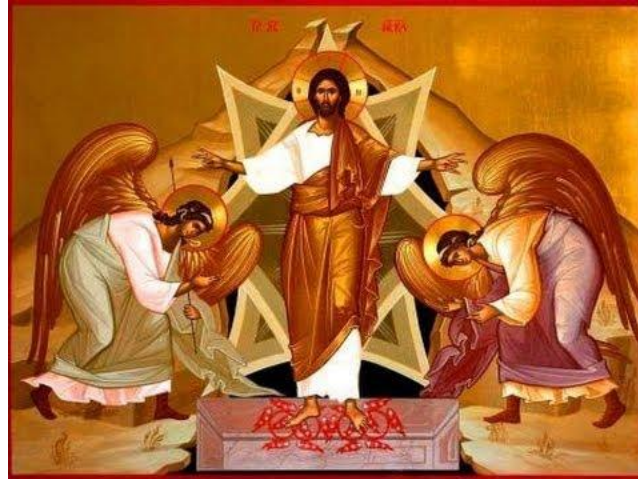


**Sunday, 6 September 2016**

[Christian Caregiving 1- vision of human health](#)



[Gen 2:5-9, 15-25; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:19, 5:16-26; Matt 5:13-16](#)

In the letter to the Romans St. Paul says, “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (Rom 12:5-6). Paul gives examples of the different kinds of gifts the Holy Spirit gives- prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leadership, and acts of mercy. More examples are given in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 12)- apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, healing, helping, administration, tongues, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, discernment, and interpretation of tongues. I don’t think Paul was trying to give an exhaustive list here, but he was giving examples of the kinds of gifts given to Christians. God gives gifts to the Church so that the church will be strengthened in her mission in the world. Paul says these gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor 12:7).

Not using your particular gift is actually the sin of sloth. We often think of sloth as just laziness, but that's not the case. Sloth is not using the special gift God has given you. So you can be really busy, and avoiding using the gift God gave you, and therefore a very busy and slothful person. The church hasn't always been very good at helping people understand their gifts and the church hasn't always made room for people to use their gifts. Sometimes the church can function as if the clergy are the ones with all the gifts, but if you've known very many clergy you know this isn't true.

The church is healthiest when Christians know what their gifts are, they develop them, and are free to use them. Some of the gifts we all participate in and use, but some people have a special capacity from God for it. For example, all Christians are supposed to be open to talk to people about what they believe, but some will have a special gift of evangelism that goes beyond what most Christians are able to do. Similarly, Christian caring is something all of us are called to, but some have a particular gift from God to care for hurting people. This week we are starting a sermon series on Christian caregiving. Each week when I'm with you we will be looking at an aspect of Christian caregiving (until we reach Advent). I'm hoping this will be helpful for everyone, and that for a few, you might feel called to be particularly focused in the area of Christian caregiving.

Sometimes we can feel really overwhelmed when it comes to helping someone who is hurting. We live in a world full of "experts" and so we worry that we don't have the training to help someone. We also live in a world full of "quick fixes". So

if we aren't an expert and we don't have the quick fix, then we can feel really frozen. I think it's important to say that there is a place for the experts- like the psychologists and the psychiatrists- but that there is a place for us as individuals and as a community as well. The community should be the normal place of healing. God wants the church to be a healing community. My hope is that we can learn to be a more healing community. A community of people who are free to help and who don't feel frozen because we aren't experts and don't have the quick fix. Sometimes people don't need the experts- they need someone who cares. And sometimes there is no quick fix to their problem- sometimes they just need someone to listen and to be in the mess with them.

As we begin to look at this it's important to ask, "What is a healthy human being?" Some forms of care are very pathology-centered. They focus on the disease- "What is the problem?" Their idea is that if we fix the problem, then we will be healthy. I want to suggest that isn't always the best way to approach Christian caregiving. If you only focus on pulling the weeds you won't have a garden, you'll have a patch of dirt. So instead of asking, "what is the problem?" we are going to ask, "What is a healthy human being?" We are going to try to be health-centered, rather than disease-centered.

C.S. Lewis, the author of the Chronicles of Narnia series and numerous other profound books, once stated, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors

or everlasting splendors” (The Weight of Glory). According to Lewis, the people you are sitting next to in the pew are immortals. These are people granted eternal life through the work of Jesus Christ. These are people called to grow into the likeness of Christ and who are empowered to do his loving work in the world.

It can be hard to think of ourselves this way, but that is what we are called to be. No doubt many who encountered Christ just saw merely the son of Joseph, the carpenter, and Mary (Mark 6:3). Jesus was that, but he was so much more. Likewise, for those filled with the life of Christ, we might look like ordinary mortals, but we are called to be saints. We are called to be a holy people (1 Cor 1:2).

The Eastern Orthodox Church uses the term “Theosis” to describe a human being who has been fully healed- It is a life filled with the life of Christ. The Western Church has sometimes called this “Sanctification”. As Christians we are to be in a perpetual process of being shaped into the image of Jesus and reflecting his character into the world.

The process by which this happens is sometimes called “Spiritual Formation”. It is the process by which the central part of who we are is transformed. We are all being formed, whether we are aware of it or not. The question is “formed into what?” There are numerous forces that act on us. What we read, who we spend time with, and programs we watch on television all shape us. These forces effect our desires, our sensitivities, and give us assumptions about the way the world works.

As Christians, what we want to happen is for the central part of who we are to begin to take on more of the character of Jesus Christ. Another way of saying this is that we become people who come under the Lordship of Christ. We become people of God's Kingdom. To accept Christ as your Lord means that you trust him when it comes to decisions about how to live your life. In our baptism we say that we accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour; that we put our trust in his grace and love; and we promise to obey him as our Lord. To keep this promise it is important to carefully consider what Jesus and his early disciples taught about how to live, which is why Bible study is so important.

In Genesis 1:27 we read, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". And one way to understand what it means to be created in God's image is to look at Colossians 1:15, which says, Jesus "is the image of the invisible God". If we want to know what a human being was meant to be, we look to Jesus. This doesn't mean we all become exactly alike. Rather, our lives take on a certain kind of Jesus-ness.

When we are talking about Christian caring, this is the end goal we keep in mind. Paul said it this way, "I am ... in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Gal 4:19). To be a Christian caregiver is to, in some way, assist God in a continuous birthing process whereby people are being formed into the likeness of Christ. That shaping will produce a life filled with the fruit of the Spirit "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal 5:22-23; see also 1 Cor 13). Paul also says, "And those who belong to

Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). This is the end goal. This is the end of the birthing process- a life not enslaved by our bodily desires, but filled with the Spirit and overflowing with the goodness of God.

When we have been shaped in this way, we get "saltier". Jesus says we are the salt of the Earth (Matt 5:13). In a world that is decaying we become the preservative. In a tasteless world we become the salt that brings out the flavor. As we are being transformed we also become the light of the world (Matt 5:14). We shine through the dark and expose firm footing. We shine the light of God which helps the world see reality as it is. This is a tall order. Jesus says, “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). And that sounds impossible and overwhelming. When CS Lewis comments on this passage he says, “I think He meant ‘The only help I will give is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less.’” This is the activity of the Holy Spirit in us. ... I believe the Biblical goal for human beings is for them to enter into a process (called “discipleship”, or we might say “apprenticeship”) under the lordship of Christ whereby we are shaped into the character of Christ.

So I’ve spent a lot of time trying to convince you of this idea, why is this so important when it comes to Christian caregiving? It matters because the care we give needs to be in line with what God is doing in a person’s life. This might be a difficult statement, but please try to understand that God cares more about your character than your comfort. God cares more about the kind of person you are becoming, than the fact that you are uncomfortable. Please don’t misunderstand, God does care

about your pain, so much so that he came to die on a cross for you. God came to feel our pain and to weep as we weep. God cares... deeply. And I do not believe that God causes our suffering. ... But If God has the choice of immediate release from discomfort and a greater formation into the image of Jesus, I believe God will choose to have us shaped into the image of Jesus rather than grant us some immediate comfort. A surgeon may allow a certain level of discomfort in order to gain a greater healing. Similarly, God may allow us to deal with an annoying neighbour if it means that we will develop the virtue of patience. ... God can transform the human torture of crucifixion into resurrection and salvation. And so certain kinds of suffering (not all kinds) can be used in this transformative way.

There are many times that Jesus healed people and I believe that God still heals people, but I also believe that God desires a greater healing- an eternal healing- rather than a temporary bodily healing. St. Irenaeus once said, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” That is God’s goal for us. Christian caregiving is to have this goal in mind as well. We are to help people see where the next step is in their journey towards being “fully alive”. We don’t have to explain all this to the people we are helping, but we should have this vision in our minds as we care for people.

This greater vision also matters because it means that this is God’s job. It’s not all up to you to make a person better. Your job as a caregiver is to compassionately walk with a person as you both seek after what God is doing in their life. You are there to try to help them along the path, but it’s not all up to you. Whatever healing is needed comes from God, not you, so you can let go of the pressure to be “fix” the person’s problem.

This vision also allows you to not have to be an expert. If a fully alive and healed person looks like Jesus, then the caregiver is probably in need of God's gracious healing just as much as the person being cared for. You don't have to be the expert. You are allowed to be a broken sinner in need of grace because it is ultimately God's healing. You are a companion on the way. You are with them in their journey recognizing they are at a particular part of the path, but you are both heading to the same destination and neither of you have arrived yet.

As we care for people it is important to remember God's bigger picture. God wants our lives to take on a Jesus-ness. He wants our lives filled with the Spirit. He wants our character shaped through following Jesus as our Lord. We are companions to each other on the road towards this ultimate healing. If our caregiving is to be "Christian" caregiving then it is important to remember this. AMEN.