

Featured Sermon

A Good Place To Be Sick

Galatians 4: 12-20 and especially vs. 13;

Alton B. Pollard, III

Allow me to set the scene. You are in the hospital. You had a medical emergency on yesterday and spent the night in intensive care. You have been taken to your semi-private room. There is a stranger lying in the bed next to you. Their curtain is half-drawn and you don't know what they've got. The air smells of masked sickness — sterile, disinfected, hygienic, and medicinal. You're becoming increasingly aware of the aching pain in your own abdomen and the mass of tubes criss-crossing your body, inserted in your nose and arms and God knows where else. There is a bag filled with something clear hanging over your head. Flowers sit on the window ledge. A card is on the table. They are expressions of love and concern.

Things are becoming a little clearer, much to your regret. The room to your door is slightly ajar. You see in the hallway two people talking. It is the doctor and your minister. What are they talking about? They look rather serious. They're probably talking about me, my condition. You are sure that's what they are talking about. You are wrong. In fact, what they are discussing has nothing to do with you at all. They are talking about a community fundraiser to be held at the hospital.

What disturbs you, what really disturbs you is that you are experiencing what it is like to be other. What was familiar, customary, and friendly in life has collapsed and given way to new and discomfiting sensations: invisibility, powerlessness, loneliness, suffering, separation, anonymity, a demoralizing sense of isolation. Others now control your destiny; the experts will determine your fate.

You are disturbed by the doctor and minister. They are out in the hallway talking, away from you, not conferring with you, not consulting you, in no way acknowledging you. You are disturbed because you have embraced the witness of the church that you are a part of the divine equation, that somehow in the ultimate scheme of things your life matters. But you have no influence here. Not in the hospital, not on the ward with its attendants, nurses, social workers, residents, chaplains,

Dr. Alton Pollard is Director of the Program of Black Church Studies and Associate Professor of Religion and Culture at Emory University, Candler School of Theology. This sermon was preached at Home Moravian Church, October 9, 2005 as part of the Clark Thompson Lecture Series.

administrators, and assorted other health care personnel. A vast and impersonal network of care surrounds you and nobody knows your name.

I remember growing up in the church. It was a large church, a prominent and respected church. My father was superintendent of the Sunday school and my mother was a teacher. On occasion, my father would take me with him on one of his visits to the homes of Sunday school members. We stopped at the home of some new members of the church, a family of twelve that had moved up north from Mississippi with little more than the clothes on their back. Another family, whose story was analogous to the first, lived under the same roof. The mother of the second family was recently widowed and had several young children of her own. The house was filled with chaos and pandemonium and my youthful eyes and ears eagerly took it all in. The father, the only adult male in the house, was away at work. From what I gathered, he was always at work, going from one job to the next, seven days a week, with little time to sleep at all. In a house filled with such clear and pressing need he was their primary means of financial support.

The two families came to church every Sunday. They were always poorly dressed, always rather unsightly, and always they stayed to themselves. Like clockwork the father would fall asleep by the time the sermon began. The members would quietly disapprove. After awhile the family left our church, they did not remain very long. They simply were not made to feel welcome. My father tried. A few others tried. But mostly the church did not care. I learned a valuable lesson about church from those two families and especially from the father. I learned from him that the church is called to be a place where the wicked cease from troubling and where the weary can be at rest. The church is called to minister to those who are chronically and terminally distressed. The church was this family's only refuge in a hostile and chaotic world. It was their Balm in Gilead, a healing place, a salve for their wounded souls. And we who are the church, suffering from our own sickness, let them down.

Now the doctor and minister are talking about you. And this is what they are saying: "The treatment went well but there will be a long period of healing. Her only family is a husband on disability who can't attend to her like he wants to. There will have to be other people helping. She will need to be encouraged some days to keep her from getting too discouraged. Help her to get her exercise. Someone is going to have to run errands. Someone is going to have to pick up prescriptions. Someone is going to have to bring her some food. Someone will need to sit with her, talk with her, watch television with her, and discuss the news with her. Someone will need to be there for her. Someone has to do all this." And the doctor turns to the minister and says, "Now look, doctors don't have congregations but pastors do. And healing takes an entire community, so reverend you are going to have to take the initiative now." They are talking about you and about what it takes for you to get well.

In the book of Galatians 4 we find a good and healthy conversation about the church. It is a strangely worded passage, and this is the way it goes (vs. 13): “You know it was because of an illness that I preached to you the first time...” What does that say? It says something that I never imagined saying in my life. I have said, “If I had not been sick I would have preached.” I have even said, “Although I was sick I preached.” But I have never said, “Because I was sick I preached.” This is an extraordinary word coming from the apostle Paul. Notice how positively he regards his own estate. “You know it was because of an illness that I preached to you the first time...” As disturbing as it may be and as quietly as it is kept, there is nothing that happens to us in life that does not present an opportunity for growth, transformation, and change. “It was because of my sickness that I was brought up to recover in the mountains of Galatians,” apparently that was the case. “And good things happened. You extended to me good will, hospitality, warmth, generosity, kindness, compassion, and love – and I knew this was a good community in which to be sick.”

In my journey over the years, across the miles, and in many places lived, I have always sought out that all too rare community of faith, the church that cuts across all of the barriers that fragment and fracture and divide, the congregation that was always willing to risk being fully present to suffering, infected, denied and rejected others. My sisters and brothers, I offer you these words. We live in a mobile, dynamic, and ever-changing world. Whoever you are, whatever you are doing, no matter where you live or your station in life, should you move from this place and relocate to another, always be sure to find a faith community where it is good to be sick, because at one time or another and perhaps even just now you will be.

Not all churches are good places to be sick. Some years ago I attended my uncle’s funeral in the Mississippi delta. My uncle had been a member of longstanding in one of the area’s local churches. He was a leader in the church and was often out visiting the sick. Then one day a car accident permanently disabled him. It was bad enough that he lost his job but worse when he lost his standing in the church. In the words of my aunt, the very congregation to whom he had given his all abandoned him in his hour of greatest need. Unable to endure life’s pain any longer, my uncle committed suicide. The pastor of the church refused to do the funeral because, according to his reading of the scriptures, suicide was an abomination before the Lord. Another minister agreed to conduct the service and promptly tried to preach my uncle into hell. Before the minister could finish his message of condemnation, my grandmother stood up. “You did not know my son. God did not give you those words.” Church, in all our ways, with one another, let us always be careful to care.

Paul said to the Galatians, “You have a good place for a person to be sick. And the remarkable thing about it is you did not associate my status with anything demonic. You did not receive me with defensiveness or revulsion or anything negative.” They could have. Two thousand years ago it was common to associate illness with badness of character just as it was common to associate good

health with godliness and goodness. Tragically, the same thing happens with money and success in our own age. The prosperity gospel has given rise to a new and impoverished interpretation of health and wealth. Material wealth is associated with virtue. Money is a consequence of devotion. Finances are a sign of divine favor. Riches are righteous. Just name it and claim it. Bad things do not happen to good people. This is a cross-less Christianity.

Do we really make such easy correlations between sick-bad, healthy-good, poor-bad, rich-good? No, we don't do that. But what's remarkable is that *in the first century* there was a community of people that said difference is not associated with any demon. And so Paul did not offend them, they did not stigmatize or avoid him, they did not sit by and say let's watch him die. He is bound to be a bad person to be this sick. This is most remarkable because here is an apostle who is preaching the suffering and dying Jesus and he himself is sick! Now a sick apostle preaching a crucified Jesus doesn't exactly instill confidence in most of us. Galatia is a remarkable community. "Your sickness put us to the test Paul, but we were not offended. We thought no less of you for whom you were and are." And Paul said, "I know. You treated me as a child of God. As one of God's own. As Christ himself. It is a wonderful place to be sick."

Paul said, "You wanted so much for me to be well." Notice he did not get well. In the scriptures, he never got well. He carried around in his body the dying of Jesus. He was never well. But the church at Galatians wanted so much for him to get well. He said, "You would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. But it would not help." This is an aching, compassionate, caring, giving community. And now he says, sadly the tables have turned, and you are the one who is sick. Not physically sick so much, but a church that is torn up, conflicted, adversarial, even violent, disrespecting each other, dividing into small groups, turning God's children away. It is no longer a healthy place to be sick. And therefore, he said, I am again in pain but it is a different pain. It is like the pain of a woman writhing and turning and sweating and groaning in the throes of childbirth and she cannot give birth. She cannot have the baby. My little children...

If there is really anything any of us look for in life it is a place to live, a place to raise our family, a place to be in community, a place where we are accepted, a good place where we can be sick, and at long last a place where we can die. All of us are in some manner sick and shattered or dead and dying and what God requires from us is nothing less than to learn to be unfailingly present with and to and for one another in the midst of the sickness and pain that is our church, our world, our selves. We need a sacred space, you and I, a safe place called community, a place we can call home — whether the church, mosque, synagogue or temple. Young and old, rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, male and female, abled and disabled, believer and non-believer, Republican and Democrat, HIV/AIDS and cancer-laden, we stand deeply in need of relationship, we need each other, we need this you and I, we cannot live without it. The church is a good place to be sick, for we are called by a God who is faithful. In spite of ourselves we are called, to minister one to another, in and out

of pain, during sickness and in health, through love and loss, from this life to the next. From this day forward, with arms outstretched, and hearts open wide, whosoever will, let them come. None of us can make it on our own. Our own Maya Angelou told us that...

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it all alone.

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The human race is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
I mean nobody
Can make it all alone.¹

Amen.

(endnotes)

¹ Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 74-5.

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

Keeping Faith's Promises to our Daughters: Conversations about Justice for Women

March 10-11, 2006
Fairview Moravian Church, Winston-Salem, NC