

“THERE IS NO PIT SO DEEP,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, August 15, 2021

Friends, do you have any fears of abandonment? I do. Who exactly knows where such things come from?

I do recall a childhood experience that was pretty scary. I must have been seven or eight. My family, who used to visit my dad’s parents and siblings in Southern California every summer, was spending the day on a beach at Malibu. The waves were high—at least from my kid’s perspective. But my mother loved them in all their churning power and crashing energy. And she didn’t want us to be afraid of them. So she cajoled and persuaded my younger brother and me to each take her hand and walk out into the Pacific Ocean waters in all their froth. “I’ll never let go of you,” she assured us. “Just jump up when the wave comes!” she then instructed us. That’s what we did, together.

It was all fun—until it wasn’t. Suddenly there came one huge wave—a monster wave, followed by a series of others. Jumping up didn’t do anything except put us in the vortex of the next wave. Despite my mother’s promise, those huge waves, one after another, tore me away from her hand and gave me a memorable dunking that seemed to go on and on. There was undertow at work here too.

In the end, I did manage to find my way to the surface and air. Yet I continued to be roughly pummeled by each successive wave and its turbulent wake. I was swiftly swept back and forth, down the shore. What a frightening time! In what probably only amounted to minutes yet seemed so much longer, I regained my footing and was able to stand up in water that was only up to my chest. While still struggling against the drag of the sea, I was able to find my way to shore before ending up awash again. However, as I finally reached a safe dry stretch of beach I realized that my mother and brother were nowhere around. The challenge lay now in finding my family. I remember crying terribly as I walked down the beach in search of them. Talk about feeling like a “motherless child”—alone and vulnerable before the world!

Fortunately, my father came running, looking for me. It must have been a desperate run for him. I don’t know who was happier to see who! He took me by the hand and led me back to our original family spot which really proved to be a considerable distance away. Naturally, my mother was also deeply relieved to see me. Yet immensely embarrassed too. She had been able to hold on to my younger brother when the big wave battered us, but not me. “I didn’t see the wave coming,” she said to me in apology and regret. “I just didn’t see it,” she repeated several times over. Malibu’s beach authorities hadn’t foreseen any of the monster waves either. Right after my happy and safe reunion with my family, they shut the whole beach down for the day. Lifeguards started waving

everyone away. The ocean waters were too rough, too hazardous for swimmers, young or old alike, they announced.

I never forgot that episode at Malibu. However, I didn't think a lot about the full loneliness of its moments until fifty years later when I underwent a major cancer surgery at one of our Detroit-area hospitals. The surgery went well. The results were very promising. Nevertheless, when I was having a follow-up appointment with my doctor I was first greeted by a younger resident who came in to ask me preliminary questions. Unfortunately, she hadn't read my medical file. She was asking things that weren't at all germane to me. She appear to possess no awareness or cognizance of my recent surgery and why I was there. I thought it might be a case of mistaken identity on her part. With more annoyance and pique than I may have realized, I informed her that she probably had the wrong patient. A few minutes later, she left.

I didn't think anything of it. Yet about ten minutes later my doctor arrived in the examining room visibly upset. Without much ado, he announced that I was the first patient who ever made one of his residents cry. Really? "Yes, really!" he said. What's more he thought I needed to find myself a new doctor. That's what he said. As I sat stunned, the doc began to walk out. Yet, then, before he reached the handle of the door, he paused, turned, and came back to me, apparently with second thoughts. "You and I have both had a tough summer," he simply observed, also alluding to issues for himself that I didn't know anything about. "Let's start this over again." And that's what we did—patient and doc together.

I still felt badly. It was not my intention to hurt anyone's feelings. For her own part, the resident was too embarrassed to step back into the examining room to talk things out or receive any apology I might offer. But before leaving that day I stopped at the gift shop where they sell flowers and sent up two bud vases for doc and resident alike, attaching my card to each with a hand-inscribed note: *Sorry to be the patient from hell this morning*. I meant that sincerely.

That awkward incident lingered with me thereafter in a good way. Although the resident should have read my chart before entering that examination room to chat with me, the fact that my doc was willing to push the reset button in the ensuing discord and confusion which followed said a lot to me about him—and his loyalty to patients like me. He did not abandon me. Moreover, for the past eight years and through what turned out to be two cancers he has continued to be my doctor, which I count as a beautiful thing. If need arises, I know that he's going to be there for me—for as long and as best he can. I trust him. That in itself doesn't take away any and all problems of health. Yet it helps dispel the loneliness that we can feel in the midst of trauma and trouble. Yes, thanks to a great doctor, along my wife, my family, my friends here, and my abiding faith in God, I

don't have to feel like that little wave-battered, wave-swept kid I once so unforgettably was, emerging from life-threatening waters to wander a beach alone in search of a mother and father.

A sense of abandonment is a terrible thing. What makes it so awful is the loneliness that goes with it—hand in hand. The fear of abandonment and the prospect of loneliness can be worse than any disease. No one is immune from it either.

Do you remember Jesus' time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper? Jesus ventures to Gethsemane's garden with his eleven remaining apostles. (*Matthew 26:30*) But it is no garden party. As he kneels to pray to God, possibly at a big rock like the one depicted in our stained glass window above our sanctuary altar, Jesus discovers that his apostles have all fallen asleep on him. (*Matthew 26:36-40*) Some of the saddest words in scripture arise from this terrible juncture in his destiny. "Can no one stay awake with me for awhile?" he plaintively asks them. But, deeply slumbering, they do not hear. (*Matthew 26:40-46*)

Subsequently, some or all of them run away into the night when Jesus is arrested by soldiers after a fateful, identifying kiss by Judas. (*Matthew 26:47-49*) A day later, there may have been some comfort for Jesus in seeing his mother and some of his disciples at Calvary, watching from a distance. (*John 19:25-27*) However, his intense anguish on the cross, which not even the two robbers crucified next to him can really share, leaves him profoundly alone, feeling abandoned. Although we know that Jesus is actually reciting a psalm that ends on a more hopeful note, it is not incidental that some of his very last words on earth frame the question: "O God, O God, why have you forsaken me?" (*Matthew 27:45-46; Psalms 22:1-3*) Whatever the truth, which Jesus surely knew, he painfully feels in that poignant moment abandoned—and profoundly lonely. Fortunately, Jesus' subsequent resurrection, observed by so many, is the evidence that neither the sense of abandonment or loneliness lasted. (*Matthew 28:16*) And it doesn't have to last for us—if our mind and heart are in the right place.

One of the terrible things about our fears of abandonment and being alone is that they can prompt us to do terrible things. They add to our fear of death. They can incite in us the greatest greed and selfishness. Meanness too. The quest for fame, money, and power is often excited by the fear of being forsaken and alone. Ironically, all that fame, money, and power can actually leave us lonely, feeling more forsaken than ever—as every King Midas finds out. And loneliness and a fear of abandonment can even haunt us in a crowd with thousands cheering us on—as politicians and rock stars discover again and again to their disappointment, dismay, and chagrin. Which may be why so many politicians end their careers in trouble and all too often rock stars end their lives with drugs. Yet the problem is not just the problem of the few. Today, our entire American

nation is so badly polarized because folks on opposite ends of the political spectrum believe that our nation's leadership has somehow abandoned them.

On the opposite side of things, a sterling example of a human being who doesn't succumb to either despair, greed, and any other manner of self-serving behavior is the Old Testament figure Job. At one point, Job has it all—family, friends, wealth, and the respect of the entire community. (*Job 1:1-5*) Everyone looks up to him, even envies him. But then, tragically, he loses it all—or nearly so. (*Job 1:13-19*) However, what Job *doesn't* lose is his faith in a God and his inner confidence, however tried and pressed, that God will yet make a path forward for him. (*Job 1:20-21*) To so-called friends who almost suggest that he would better off dead, Job keeps on insisting, "I know my redeemer lives!" (*Job 19:25*)

In the end Job's trust in God is completely vindicated. God does come through for Job, restoring everything he originally lost and more. (*Job 42:10-17*) Yet this restoration of worldly goods and family is not the point of the story. Instead, Job's unwillingness to give up on God and his relationship with him *is*. In fact, what keeps Job going through all his trials is not the hope of justly restored wealth and power down the road, but rather the sense that God remains his companion through life's present rocky patch, never forsaking or abandoning him. Yes, as Job says it with such deep conviction: "I know my redeemer lives!" (*Job 19:25*) Job's words are just as heartening and meaningful today as a light and beacon for us all as they were when spoken three to four thousand years ago.

Of course, this morning, I am also thinking of the more contemporary story of Corrie Ten Boom and her sister, Betsie, which later became the basis of the book and film known as *The Hiding Place*. Along with her sister and father, Corrie took to hiding persecuted Jews in their own home when the Nazis invaded and conquered their native Holland. The many Jews whom the Ten Boom sisters and their father hid in their secret household room were not found. But father and daughters were duly arrested for trafficking in the counterfeit ration cards that they found necessary to feed and protect their endangered guests. Almost immediately the elderly Mr. Ten Boom dies in the Nazi concentration camp. Sister Betsie lasts longer, but succumbs to malnutrition and salvation after hardly a year. Only Corrie survives and is liberated.

Initially, in camp life it is hatred and anger towards the Nazis which motivates Corrie, keeping her going each day in face of constant cruelty and abuse. Yet as a devoutly Christian woman, Corrie also knows that, however stimulating and motivating hatred and anger might be, each can eventually consume and spiritually ruin us, leaving us no better than our foes. Fortunately in time, Corrie Ten Boom finds herself differently fortified by words of more faithful wisdom imparted by her sister Betsie. As Betsie succinctly expresses herself in the spirit of true faith: "There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper

still!” Indeed, for Betsie it is a mantra, said many times over aloud as she sees Corrie simmering with anger. Betsie’s words bear our repeating even now: “There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still!”

If I’ve got it right, what Betsie Ten Boom was profoundly observing here is that when we are faced with the greatest struggle and pain, when everything is so dark, and our troubles are so deep, we as men and women of faith are not alone. Why? Because we are only drawing closer to the company and experience of Jesus on Calvary’s cross—a cross he embraced for the sins of all, because he loved us. Pain is still pain. Anguish may remain. But, thanks to Jesus, we don’t have to feel abandoned and forsaken.

The whole world may forsake us—or seem to. But Jesus does not. That knowledge—the assurance that we are not really alone—can get us through a lot. It can keep us sane and hopeful—and even joyful without denying reality at all.

Although Jesus our redeemer is always going to be here for us if we just look for him and await his spiritual presence, he calls us throughout his ministry to also be here for each other. That’s the whole purpose of the church, which is meant to be “the living body of Christ” and his arms, legs, and heart in the world. Just as Jesus loved us, our savior asks us to love one another, loyally and steadfastly so that all who have need can find a “haven in a heartless world,” not left lonely and afraid.

For years here at St. Paul we’ve said that “Churched kids have a better chance” and “Churched families have a better chance.” The truth is we all have a better chance of a good life, a constructive life, an unselfish life when we don’t feel lonely or abandoned or forsaken. Well-verified health and medical statistics further illumine the story. People of faith who trust that God loves them and have family and friends who love them too live longer and better, always reporting a more satisfying quality of life.

I feel badly for those who have given up or are chasing after the wrong gods without sometimes even knowing it. Where are they going to be ten, twenty, thirty years from now, as older age creeps upon them and their health becomes less certain, or the values they chose to live by prove shallow and disappointing? How lonely it will get! Although they won’t have the benefit of experience with faith, I hope they won’t be so deaf or self-distracted as not to hear God speaking to them in a voice, whether soft or loud, letting them know that, just as Jesus taught, he is also here for them, inviting and welcoming them to a personal relationship with him that can save them from despair and disillusionment with life. As God’s people, may we all find strength, hope, and joy for daily life through our confidence in him and our saving, always encouraging relationships with Jesus and one another. **Amen.**

