"Vulnerable But Not Alone"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
October 19, 2014

Life is hard. Life sucks.

Life is never going to get better.

People only care about themselves.

It's hopeless. Nothing will ever change. Don't even bother.

Oh, just give up. No one cares.

No one cares. You're on your own.

Pretty dismal isn't it?
But, that is how some people feel, isn't it?
Perhaps it's even how some of us feel or
have felt at times in our lives.
Sometimes, life can get really, really hard.
We can find ourselves bowled over by a sudden loss
of a job, our health, or a person whom we love.
Or, we find ourselves slogging through
piles of concerns that have accumulated
seemingly without notice.
Sometimes . . .it can all just seem *[pause]* too much.

The truth is that in life everyone *will* face
sorrow, challenges, set-backs, and losses.

On Friday, I was reminded of this truth in a small way.
Perhaps like some of you,I struggle with making time to exercise—
I'd rather curl up with a book than head off on a bike.
But, I decided several weeks ago that it would be a good thing for me
and for my ministry with you if I strove to be a healthy person.
So I signed up for some personal training to get me back into shape.
It's been going well—until Friday morning
when a quick step to the left rolled my foot
and left me crumpled on the floor with a sprained ankle.
Lying there on the floor, the tears stung my eyes . . .
both because of the pain and because I knew that
this would be a set-back in my fledgling exercise routine.

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I had tried to do the right thing.
Now I was lying on the floor in pain.
I could hear the voice . . . “oh, just forget it.”
“Why bother if you’re just going to get hurt?!”

Feeling mopey and alone,
I hobbled my way home to prop up my ankle
and to look for sympathy.
I texted my closest two friends.
I called my mom.
And, then, I, of course,
posted a picture of my swollen ankle on Facebook.

And . . . it worked.
Friends, colleagues, and even some of you
posted words of concern, care,
and advice on my Facebook page.
(*yes, I do friend congregants if you request it*)
By the day’s end, the swelling in my ankle was already down
and, more importantly, I was no longer feeling alone.

The truth is that being human, being alive
means that we’re going to encounter
challenges and losses, failures and pain.
It’s easy to think that “normal” is supposed to mean that
all is well, all is fine, and that there are no “problems.”
But I think that the reality is that life is always
a mix of what is going well and bringing you joy
and what is breaking your heart and
causing you concern.
In other words, “normal” for life is that we’re going to be facing
a mix of joys and sorrows throughout all of our days.

Of course, sometimes this mix of the two can feel heavily weighted
towards one or the other.

If I can jump to another metaphor,
I imagine this mix to be like a solar eclipse
with the moon covering differing amounts of the sun.
Depending on how much of the moon
is covering the sun,
the amount of visible light changes.
So also, the proportion of joys and sorrows can certainly
feel like an eclipse as they each wax and wane
throughout our lives.

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Significantly, in a solar eclipse when the moon covers all of the sun,
a rim of light glows around the dark circle of the moon—
a reminder that the light is simply covered,
not extinguished.
As one of my favorite verses from the Christian Bible says:
"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:5)

This image of the inextinguishable light can be a powerful one.
Light—such as the candle flame burning in our chalice—
has long been a religious symbol testifying
to the presence of something
breaking through the darkness.
For me, light is an important spiritual metaphor
not simply for hope, but also as a symbol of
the sun as a source of life.

During my work as a hospital chaplain,
I witnessed how powerful this symbol of light could be
to someone with great sorrow.
As a part of my training to become a Unitarian Universalist minister,
I spent a summer at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center
learning about hospital chaplaincy with a group of
6 other soon-to-be ministers or rabbis.
I was assigned to a vascular floor where many of the patients
were struggling with complications from advance diabetes.
When I first met Mary,
she was barely conscious as she wrestled
with intense pain in her foot.
After a surgery on her foot, the pain was improved
and she was more lucid,
giving us a chance to talk more.
I learned about her family and her faith.
I learned about her struggles and her fears.
We learned together that the doctors felt
that her foot surgerywas not enough and
that they would need to amputate her leg.
Mary was so scared.
She was scared of not being able to be independent,
of not being able to play with her grandchildren,
and of dying in the surgery.
Faced with her fears,
she said the night was the hardest time.
That in the darkness she felt so alone.

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In hospitals, candles are forbidden of course,
but the chaplains office kept a store of
battery-operated candles to light
Shabbat candles for orthodox Jewish patients.
So, I brought one of these candles to Mary
telling her that it was to remind her that
she was *not* alone—
that her family, her friends from church,
and me were all there with her.
As a Christian, Mary believed in God and we talked also
about Psalm 23 and how this passage promises
that God would walk with her in
the valley of darkness.
This little plastic light held in its dimness
all of these connections that assured Mary
that she was *not* alone.

Like Mary, we all find ourselves in times of darkness.
We find ourselves in times when the sorrow and fear,
loss and sadness threaten to eclipse
our sense of the joy and goodness of life.

For me, one of these times was in my mid-20's.
I had married fairly young at 24.
Shortly after, I became pregnant with my son.
From the beginning, my marriage was difficult.
Yet, in my family, people didn't divorce.
I didn't want to divorce.
Although I had stopped attending church,
I still felt strongly the religious lessons of my youth
that marriage was for life.

But as the months and then the years went by,
the eclipse of light in my life became darker and darker.
Finally, I made a bargain with myself...telling myself
that I would stay unless I felt my spirit within begin to die.

And when I did feel a spiritual death creep close,
I turned to the one place I thought might help:
a local, liberal Christian church.
That first Sunday that I walked through the doors,
I immediately was transported back
to my *experiences* of church as a child and teenager.
I could feel <u>a whole other way</u> of looking at the world—
a feeling of hope, of goodness,
of not being alone.

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I remembered what it felt like to be a part of a community
that cared for one another and helped those in need,
that believed in making things better,
and that believed life itself
was a holy, wondrous gift.

In this way, the light that overcame my darkness
came in the form of a religious community
that was committed to caring for one another,
to serving the larger world,
and to holding fast to a faith in the inherent
dignity of human life.
By reconnecting with a religious community,
my spirit began to be renewed and I was able
to forge a new life for myself and my son.
I tell you this story today because it is a key to my deep
commitment to the value and importance
of religious communities.
Life can be really, really hard.
We are all vulnerable to the losses and suffering of life.
But, we do not need to be alone in our sorrows.

In today's reading, Nicolas Wolterstorff shares a bit
of what he learned from being in the darkness of suffering.
He says, that wise words are not necessary.
But it is critical to connect with the one who is suffering—
to draw near and not be distant "over there."
Rather, he calls us to express our love,
to share an embrace,
to simply sit beside someone
as they suffer.

Wolterstorff also calls us not to shrink from or minimize
the reality of suffering in someone's life.
Such deep loss and grief *is* real—
as too many of us here in this meeting house
know too well.
Denying or hiding from such sorrow
leaves the one who suffers all alone.
Rather, it is by drawing near, by being willing
to sit with another in their sorrow
that love is given,
that connection is made.

My sense of this congregation so far
is that in many, many ways that you know just

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what I'm saying and how to show such love—
how to sit with one another in grief
and in sorrow, in loss and in pain.

Today I want to reflect this strength back to you—
to affirm the ways that this congregation
takes care of one another.
In this service, we have affirmed the lay ministers
who have stepped forth to do this work of care
on behalf of the congregation.
And, as we saw in the Time for All Ages,
this work of caring extends throughout the congregation.
So very, very many of you have been a part
of this work of caring for each other.

Today, I also want to hold up the importance of the
sharing of joys and sorrows with each other in the service.
I love these moments when we can hold up
the mix of joy and sorrow,
light and darkness
that make up our lives.
In designing the order of service this year,
I have been intentional to situate
this time of joys and sorrows
within a framework of prayer and meditation.
It doesn't matter whether or not
you believe in prayer as an appeal to God
or simply to the holy within this human community,
I believe that sharing our joys and sorrows
with each other *is* a kind of prayer—
as a reaching out beyond oneself
to connect what is within
one's own heart and mind
to those gathered here.
At its best, such sharing of joys and sorrows
is akin to sitting on the bench beside another
in nearness to show one's love.
To me, sharing joys and sorrows in the midst
of a Sunday service is simply *not* the same as
making an announcement.
Rather, such sharing is about <u>connections</u> with others—
as the Rev. Thom Belote writes,
"Even though the candle you light is
for something that is personal to you,
the moment is front of the congregation
is transactional.

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"My aunt is having surgery this week and your thoughts and
prayers would be greatly appreciated."
"I invite you to join with me in celebrating
my 25th wedding anniversary which is today.""
When we share with each other in a public way,
it's not just about us as an individual—
its about the connections between us as
a community committed to caring for one another.

Life *can* be really hard sometimes.
Sometimes the darkness and difficulty can threaten
to eclipse the light and life, hope and joy within us.
My hope for us as a community
is that we continue to seek to be a place
where we can show love and care to each other
even when we don't have wise words,
even when we don't have any words at all.
We all live within the mix of joy and sorrow,
Light and darkness.
May we each seek to connect with others—
whether we are in darkness seeking an embrace
or whether we are called
to sit beside another in their grief.
So May it Be.
Amen.

Reading **excerpt from *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff**

I have chosen a reading by Nicholas Wolterstorff from his book Lament for a Son. *In the book, Wolterstorff recounts in raw prose his journey of mourning and loss after his young adult son was killed in a mountain climbing accident.*

What do you say to someone who is suffering?
Some people are gifted with words of wisdom.
For such, one is profoundly grateful.
There were many such for us.
But not all are gifted in that way.

That's OK too. Your words don't have to be wise.
The *heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken.*
And if you can't think of anything at all to say, just say,
"I can't think of anything to say.

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But I want you to know that
we are with you in your grief."

Or even, just embrace.
Not even the best of words can take away the pain.
What words can do is testify that there is more than pain
in our journey on earth to a new day.
Of those things that are more, the greatest is love.
Express your love.
How appallingly grim must be the death of a child
in the absence of love.

But please: Don't say it's not really so bad.
Because it is. Death is awful, demonic.
If you think your task as a comforter is to tell me that really,
all things considered, it's not so bad,
you do not sit with me in my grief
but place yourself off in the distance away from me.
Over there, you are of no help.
What I need to hear from you is
that you recognize how painful it is.
I need to hear from you
that you are with me in my desperation.
To comfort me, you have to come close.
Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.

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