

**October 4, 2009**

Hi. This isn't actually a sermon—so I guess it's not fair to time it. But I really want to talk a bit about the last month, and especially the last week or so. I'll do a little of that now, and probably print what I say today in the Newsletter. Also, I'm very glad I don't have to deal too intensely with today's readings; especially with what Jesus has to say about marriage. Sometimes, the one flesh just doesn't last long enough.

As you all know, this last month has been terrible for Will and me, as it has for you. There's just no way around that—terrible. Kathleen's last illness and death are the worst piece of my life so far and, I pray, forever. And I have barely begun walking through what it means, and what it feels like. Many, too many, of you know exactly what I mean, and exactly how it feels. There you are—nothing can change that. It's just awful.

But that's not all there is to say. First of all, during the last several days more than one person has asked me about how all this has affected my faith—my understanding of the truth and the meaning of the Christian life. It's a fair question, and one worth talking about. So, I'll say just a word about that, especially since it leads into to what I most want to say.

To begin, I must confess that, as an adult, I've never believed that either our faith, or God's love for us, or the sacrifice of Christ, have ever provided anyone one bit of protection from, or guarantee against, the full expanse of what it means to be a human being. Neither are they a way for us to insure that we'll get what we want—be that an easy, pain free, life or a parking place at the mall or anything in between.

A quick look at the life of Jesus and the disciples makes that abundantly clear. We are simply not immune; life really is not fair; and anything can happen to anyone.

Job was right, “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward”. The bumper sticker is right, too—stuff happens. And I’ll go so far as to say that anyone who tells you otherwise—anyone who tells you that our faith in the crucified one is a ticket to what we want—that anyone is either very young, or very lucky, or deeply mistaken, or simply dishonest. It doesn’t work like that.

So my faith, while it tells me much about the world about life, has never told me that terrible things would not happen. Susan Wilkerson, Kathleen’s sister, has struggled with MS for the last 25 years; and when someone asks Susan what she thinks about the question “Why Me?”, Susan always replies, “Why not me?” That answer’s about as good as any—that and the certainty that God does not go around maliciously or randomly flinging illnesses and death at his beloved children like pieces of candy in a parade. That’s so wrong.

But that’s still not all there is to say. To say that God is not responsible for terrible things does not mean that God is absent from terrible things. The simple fact is that we are never alone. Never. No matter what. No matter how we feel about it. We are not. No matter how dark, how terrible, how grim and loud and powerful the powers that seek to destroy us are, we are not alone. There are always rays of light, and rays of hope, to be found. Not always, indeed not even usually, are they what we want—but they are there.

That’s what I really want to talk about. For this recent darkness of mine has been pierced, indeed torn apart, by these rays of light and of hope. God has been with us, and with us with skin on.

Perhaps the greatest of these rays of light and hope for me has been the opportunity to be with our son during this time. Will has always been a really great kid; but recently I have had the honor of dealing with a truly wonderful man; a grown man. Will's compassion, strength, courage, maturity, and unfailing gentleness of spirit have been a great source of strength; and he has helped me at least as much as I have helped him—probably more. I simply could not have gone through this without my son. I am deeply proud, and humbly grateful to Will, for all that he has given his mother and me these last two years, and especially this last month. Thank you.

But that's still not all there is to say about rays of light and rays of hope. I want to begin the impossible undertaking of trying to say "Thank you" to each and every one of you, and to all of you together, for who you have been to Kathleen, Will and me these last weeks. In case you hadn't noticed, you have been Jesus Christ, and Christ crucified, to us and for us. Really. In ways the depth and scope of which I have neither seen nor imagined before.

Your strength, your caring, your prayers, your presence in so many forms, have been a deeply moving sign of your love for us. Kathleen spoke often during her illness of being covered with a blanket of prayers. I know that this blanket covers her still. Such prayers become for all of us a felt presence, a tangible reality—a gentle blanket. We knew you were there, waiting and longing and hurting with us. We feel that still. You have given us an overwhelming sense of being loved and cared for—it is stunning; it is humbling, and it is a source of great strength and abiding gratitude. We have never felt such compassion and support, and it has left an indelible mark upon us.

There have been so many gifts in this: The almost casual way you have excused me from my duties as your Rector for these grim weeks has given me a freedom that very few people ever experience at a time like this. A great gift.

And—and I know that this has been very, very hard for you—but your willingness to give us space, not to press yourselves in on us, to wait and to love at the distance you knew we needed, this has been and is precious beyond words—and we thank you. Again, we knew you were always there; and we could not have done this without you; you have been Christ for us.

The hospitality of parish around Kathleen's death, the dinner for our family, the glorious and very personal Requiem Eucharist, and the reception that Harris and so many others gave the Diocese and us, all of that was perfectly and elegantly offered, and it has been life-changing. Rays of light, and rays of hope.

I simply cannot begin to thank personally here all of you to whom we owe a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid—so many of you have given so much to Kathleen, Will and me. Still, I must say a special word to Linda Jordan, to Tom and Gwen Burns, to Jim Brown and the Vestry, to Darryl Knapp and Bob Poer, and to Josie and Roland Rose. Each of you, in the ways we needed most, have walked every step of this road with us. Thank you; and thank you all.

And I know it has been exhausting; and I know that it has been a labor of love—but I also know that something wonderful about our parish has been made fully incarnate here, and that if we can find a vocation in this, if we can all together care and love like this, then I know that Saint Nicholas' will be a blinding beacon of Christ's love to this community, to this diocese, and beyond. I know that.

Now, I want to say a word or two about me, and about where I am. I've been asked a few questions about this, too, and I want to respond as best I can right now.

Burying my wife two days before my 60th birthday puts me, and anyone like me, in the front of the line for a belated but rather spectacular mid-life crisis. I'm acutely aware of that. I also know that it is very unwise for me to make any major decisions about the long-term direction of life for many, many months. But at least one thing is clear. It has always been, and will continue to be, my firm intention to serve as your Rector until I retire, or die, or am run out of town on a rail—whichever comes first. That won't change. I plan to be back in the office pretty much full-time tomorrow, and I'm looking forward to that. The only part that really worries me is this—I'm a bit anxious about resuming preaching. Bear with me on that.

On the other hand, I do expect that I'll be a little weird for the next several months, although I have absolutely no idea what that will look like—except for one thing. Last Friday I did conform to the stereotype of the aging male by buying a new car that is far above my station. (The ones we had were just too haunted.) I hope my weirdness stops there; although I sorta doubt it. Also, some time in the next few months I know that I will need to take some time off to myself (probably a road trip); but again, I have no idea yet when or where. Just be gone. Finally, of course, I will need your continuing help and support in many, many ways—most of which I don't even know yet. And I will endeavor to be open to that help.

I'm glad this wasn't a sermon—it would be too long. But I did want to share with you a bit of what's been going on with me. God has been with me, as he is with Kathleen—of that I am certain. And, for Will and me, we have seen God most clearly in you. Once more, thank you, and God bless you.