



When the Coffee Can't Comfort

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
15 October 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

My sermon title for today arrived early on in my recovery from surgery. In my third week of recovery, when I was able to mark one week in my own bed, I asked my wife to bring me my first real, non-hospital coffee, since the surgery. Everything in the hospital had been rough – especially the coffee – one sip and I was done. So, of course, coffee at home – would be my salvation. She brought the coffee. I sipped the coffee. And I looked at her and said, “No, I cannot, it does not taste good.” She looked at me with a sly smirk and said, “maybe you will never drink coffee again.” So my sermon title today, as my wife smiles away, is “When the Coffee Can't Comfort.”

I am so happy to be here, in this moment, at this pulpit. It seems, a pastor without a pulpit, is only worth the example of the life they have led. Or more to the point – the pastor without a pulpit is only worth the example of those the pastor has led as shepherd for a time. You have done great things in my absence. You have welcomed visitors in your midst. You have prayed for me and my family. You have tended each other. You have honored the other pastors in your midst with respect and appreciation for all the extras Pastor Edwin and Pastor Tony have picked up while I have recovered. I have read more cards than I can count and I am grateful for your cloud of faithful witness that has tended my pain, my tears, my frustration, and supported me through some very difficult days.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

We take so much for granted in this life. Peace, in our world, where it can be found. Love, in our lives, when it is received. Health, in our bodies, when we live like we are immortal. I debated the stories to be told this day. Like so much of my life – you will hear about it sooner or later. How many times have I prayed at the bedside of someone preparing for surgery? Held the hands of a spouse keeping vigil; tended the adult children of a mother waiting for news from the surgeon; wiped the tears of parents who should never have to pray over their little one being prepared for surgery. And I will tell you – I would do it, all of it, over and over again. I hate being the one in the bed. Having my hand held by my wife – doing her best to reassure me as she is holding herself together. Being prayed over by my pastor – who is also deeply invested in friendship and offering his strength for both the patient and his wife. And then the doctors – too many to count – who check in and ask questions and ask if I have any questions. All of a sudden it is time – there is one last hug, one last kiss, one last “I love you,” one last knowing glance at each other. Yeah, I hate being the one in the hospital bed. The peace of that moment is knowing that the woman I love more than anyone else in this life is going to be loved and tended and held by her best friend and one of her pastors for the next 15 hours through the waiting of a surgery that lasted 5 hours longer than it was supposed to while hearing words of comfort, feeling the prayers of support from so many of you, and being reminded that the day would not come to an end without hearing the voice of her husband once again. Apparently, I was funny at 11:30 that night when wife, pastor, and best friend met me in recovery. I remember nothing. But I am told I was funny. Well, of course, what else is there to do when you wake up from surgery. Except to laugh.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. I am grateful to the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Philippi. From the time it was established, the church at Philippi was healthy, strong, and generous, becoming a model church. It is no wonder that I am drawn to these words of Paul's letter. The church I currently serve as pastor is also healthy, strong, and generous – even in my absence. No, wait. Especially in my absence. What joy it brings me to return this day.



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²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son,” says Jesus. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away...⁷ The king was enraged...⁸ Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

My first worship service, in-person, after two months of recovering, was two Saturdays ago as we celebrated the wedding of Pastor Tony and Lori’s daughter Savannah. Like every couple who plan a wedding – no matter how much preparation and double-checking you do, life gets in the way. The day was breezy, cold, and gray. The church was warm and full of joy. The bride was beautiful. Her father cried as he walked her down the aisle. The groom, who really prefers to not be the center of attention, waited to hold her hand in front of the altar. Vows were shared. Tears were shed. The groom smiled more than once and there was great celebration as they kissed. Only the parents and close friends knew the appetizers were more than an hour late and the desserts needed to be plated as dinner was ending. In the end, the wedding hall was filled with guests, and our God smiled on the day filled with worship, celebration, and love. This is the point where I prefer to end this parable of Jesus.

If you read on, we hear someone gets into the wedding without their wedding robe. The king orders the man bound and thrown out into the darkness. All due respect to our Savior and my theological degree, but I would have preferred Jesus let the parable end on a moment of joy as the gathered wedding guests who had not expected to attend were invited to enjoy the wedding and the feast. But we take a lot for granted and as we all know, life gets in the way sometimes. I know the parable is about walking away from the invitation and welcome of our God. Yet, I am convinced that this wedding banquet was message enough for those who gathered at the last minute – that the welcome arms of our God are always wide enough for everyone who hungers to be known and to be loved.

In the early days of my ministry, I took a lot for granted. Being young was a gift and everyone wanted to call a young pastor to bring young families into the church. Truth be told, it does not always work that way. In my second call in Idaho, the older members wondered how I would minister to them while being so young. A wonderfully wise elder told her friends that it would be up to them to teach the young pastor how to minister to people in the golden, but not so golden years. I learned so much from the older members of Redeemer. Yet, it would be the first seven days after surgery that taught me even more. The first two days were full of pain and tears. Doctors who wanted to have lofty conversations using vocabulary reserved for medical school. My wife held my hand. She argued with doctors. She listened carefully. She forced me out of bed to walk down the hallways when I did not believe it was possible. On the third day, they took out the nasal gastric tube from my nose. It was a wonderful relief. They told me to drink clear liquids. I chose coffee and chicken broth for breakfast and vegetable broth for lunch. Unbeknownst to my doctors, the new connection between my stomach and small intestine was too swollen to allow my stomach to empty any liquids. That night, I began to vomit and continued to vomit until the surgical team arrived at 6:30 the next morning. When the surgical team said the NG tube had to go back through my nose and into my stomach which brought instant relief but also the realization I had aspirated into my lungs and would now need seven days of iv antibiotics along with a blood transfusion. My wife showed up moments after the NG tube went back in and held my hand while I cried. She read me card after card sent with your love and prayers and after a while the day became brighter.



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In all my life I have never known such surrender, such dependence on another person. They wheeled me down to x-ray that afternoon. I had no strength. To stand up without assistance was nearly impossible. I could not hold my cell phone to read text messages. In that moment, being assisted to the CT table to lay down, I began to pray. I thanked God for this life even in such an absolute moment of despair and I gave thanks for this community of faith and for your faithful reminder that: in the way that a great cup of coffee has fixed many things but offering me time to reflect, to enjoy another's company, to offer a moment of reconciliation to restore what is broken, there are times in life that no matter how hard we try, we can't fix everything. And for that we have Jesus – Jesus who invites all of us into this restoration when he says, "Come." "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus, who invites us to rest as he restores all our brokenness to make us whole once again. And in the arms of Jesus, that is where I have been reminded to rest and where all of you are invited to do the same.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.