

“Mutual Love”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
September 1, 2019 Ordinary 22C

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

It's wonderful to see such life here, so many new faces and young people. When I retired back in January of 2016, Betsy Voreacos said the best gift you could give me was to do well after I left. Of course there are ups and downs, but it's clear that you are doing well, and I'm happy and proud to see it. Every pastor, as well as every single new person who comes and takes part in a church community, they will change the flavor of a church to some extent. I did it. Leah did it. All the new people are doing it. And you're still you, and you are healthy and you are moving forward. I've seen pictures of the church on Facebook, and now I get to see you in person, and I give thanks to God.

I'd like to thank you as a congregation for honoring the boundaries Presbytery set for churches and pastors as they go their separate ways. The rules may have sounded harsh at first, because we had been through so much together and care for each other. But I found the boundaries helpful for me to move on with my life. And I'm sure they are helpful for you as a congregation, to keep you looking forward rather than back. I'm here today at Leah's invitation, and I appreciate her openness and generosity in inviting me. But I still plan to abide by the same boundaries and I hope you understand and respect them too.

Still, I know you have been praying for me over the last year and I am deeply grateful. As many of you know, a year and a half ago I had some urinary problems, and over the summer my doctor found a small tumor in my bladder. By the time she got around to operating in September, the tumor was way too big to remove and was invading the bladder wall. I was immediately referred to Sloan Kettering Cancer Center where they diagnosed me with a rare and aggressive stage three bladder cancer. The doctors wouldn't give me a prognosis. But when I looked it up on line, which I'm told you should never do, one website said the median life expectancy for this kind of cancer was one year. My doctor assured me that data on line can be outdated, that they are coming up with new treatments all the time, and that I was relatively young and in good health to start with, so I shouldn't take the statistics as a death sentence. But I couldn't help thinking about death.

Now on the whole, I tend to be an unemotional and rational person. I've done enough funerals for young people, and I figured that at age 66, I have lived longer than most people in the world get to live. We all have to go sometime. I've had a rewarding career and don't have a long list of things I still hope to do. My husband, Tom, can still take care of himself. My children are all gainfully employed and happily married. They would miss me, but they would be OK. So rationally speaking, if I were to die sooner rather than later, it would OK. But the thought of death was still really sad, and Tom and I did our share of weeping.

The treatment started last October with four months of chemotherapy. I lost all my hair, and was tired and nauseous from the drugs. By January I was basically lying on the couch all day, with barely enough energy to hail a cab to make it across town for my next treatment. They

had to reduce some of the doses of chemicals because I was losing feeling in my feet and my blood counts were often too low. Still, my oncologist was pleased that I could tolerate as much as I did.

Then, just as I started to recover from the chemo, I had a major operation to remove my bladder and several other internal organs. It lasted five-and-a-half hours and knocked me down again. And it took way longer than they predicted for me to recover from surgery. But the good news is they found absolutely no living cancer cells in the parts they took out. It was the best possible outcome. And as far as I know, I am cancer free today. I have to have a scan every three months for several years because there's still a small chance it can come back. But I'm grateful to be alive now. To me, it was a miracle.

Today I want to tell you what I believe made the difference. Not all cancers are curable, but the kind I had is particularly susceptible to chemotherapy, if the patient can tolerate the onslaught of drugs. We used, not the usual two, but three strong chemicals. I had a great doctor who was attentive and tuned in to how my body was reacting, and was able to adjust the doses to fit what I could take, while still being effective. Those are the important scientific factors that made a difference. But what made the biggest difference in my mind and spirit was the overwhelming amount of love and support I got from family and friends.

I wish everyone could experience that outpouring of love, without having to have a life-threatening disease. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It opened my eyes to what God's kingdom, God's reign on earth is all about. You may remember that as your pastor I was used to mobilizing people to care for others. And caring for others has many rewards. But it was a totally different experience for me to be on the receiving end.

I received more than I could ever ask for or imagine, starting with a neighbor who asked if she could cook for us every Monday after chemo-therapy. What a gift that turned out to be, to come home, exhausted, and find a hot meal ready for us! Then one of my sisters suggested that family members shave their heads in solidarity with me. But everyone was thrilled with that idea, especially those with long hair, and I wasn't sure it would actually be helpful, given that most of them lived far away and I wouldn't be seeing them anyway. So I suggested they wear a headscarf once in a while instead. That idea morphed into a Facebook group they created called "Headscarf Mondays." On the day I had chemotherapy each week, family members, and increasingly more and more friends, would wear a headscarf and post pictures of themselves with encouraging messages and prayers. During the week as I lay on the couch feeling sick, I would look at those faces and read the messages over and over. It felt like all those people were right there with me. It helped me keep a sense of humor and a positive attitude. It gave me energy and joy in a time of feeling weak and listless.

Prayer also made a big difference. At least 10 or 12 churches were praying for me. Plus my daughter Cassia's prayer group in Haiti, and many people I probably still don't know about. But it's not the number of people that made the difference. It's that they prayed from the heart, and specifically for those drugs to seek out and pulverize any and all cancer cells, especially those that may have strayed, and for me to have the strength to recover. I could feel the power of those prayers and they helped me to pray as well.

It was hard for me to pray with all my heart for healing for myself. I wasn't always sure I believed it was possible. I've had such a good life already, how could I ask for more? So many people needed it more than I did. But Tom set me straight on that one, reminding me that spirituality is not zero sum. There is not a limited amount of God's Spirit, just as there is no limit to the amount of love in the world. The more we love, the more love there is. Tapping into God's power doesn't take any power away from other people. It just makes God more visible on earth. Why not ask for more? So I joined my prayer warriors, asking for the drugs to be 100% effective, for complete healing.

We don't always get what we pray for. But we can still ask with all our heart. And the asking itself brings us into God's presence and gives us access to a power we might not otherwise know or experience.

I learned something else through this ordeal. I never was seriously ill before. I knew I needed people to pray for me, but I had no idea what other kind of help I would need. And even if I did know, like many people I don't always feel comfortable asking. I got several general offers to help, "If you need something, just call." But what does that mean? I rarely called anyone beyond close family for help. But when people offered something specific, I was much more likely to say yes. I never asked anyone for food, and I didn't really "need" food. Tom is a great cook, and we can always order out. But then a church member told me she had just cooked a big pot of potato soup, could she bring some over? Of course! I didn't know it, but it was just what I needed at the time. We had people clean and organize our apartment, do our laundry, stay with me while Tom was gone for the day, give me foot massages. A friend, who is a massage therapist, came over every week to give me a foot massage. Every week my daughter Talitha and her husband made up a clever song about fighting cancer. They recorded it and sent us the video. Some of them were hysterically funny, and it was good to smile and laugh. Friends came and cheered me up with a movie, or just stopped in without staying too long. Talitha and my sister Sue each took a week off from work to help out the day of surgery and right after.

I would never think to ask someone to do any of those things. But we received more than we could ever imagine, because people thought of something specific they could do and offered it. Saying yes gave people the opportunity to give of themselves. It created new friendships and deepened old ones. I found myself weeping in gratitude several times a day. With all the distrust, hatred and negativity in the world, this was truly a testament to a higher and deeper reality. I call it the Kingdom of God. And it's both wonderful and humbling to be on the receiving end.

Today Christian and Keyla read from the book of Hebrews: "Let mutual love continue..." In other words, keep loving each other. The Christian community in Hebrews already understood the power of love. The Greek word for love here is "philadelphia," which means brotherly or sisterly love. Christians are to care for each other as though we are family, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now there are all kinds of families, including families where grown brothers and sisters barely speak to each other. What does it mean to love your family? Most normal families don't

always *feel* close or loving toward each other. But this kind of love is not necessarily based on *feelings*. It's a blessing when you can feel close to your family members. But if one of your family members needs you, you'll do what you can no matter how you're feeling at the time. That's what family love is about. And this is the kind of love we are to have for each other in a Christian community; to care how our brothers and sisters are doing, and to want what's best for them.

Of course if a family member is exploiting or abusing you, that's another story. Sometimes what's best for everyone is to stay away from each other. We can't fix everyone's problems. But in our Christian family, we do what we can to help, whether it's a small act of kindness, or a big movement to fight for justice or change laws to benefit those in need.

What can you offer? It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Sometimes it's just a ride home from the doctor, a meal, a short visit, or a listening ear. You can be creative. Think about who you are, and what you can gladly give in each situation.

If you're the one in need, you don't have to say "yes" to every offer. Maybe you're a private person, or you don't need or want what someone offers. That's OK. Just the fact that they offered makes a difference, even if you say "no thank you," or "not right now, thank you." One of our neighbors offered to dig our car out if it snowed last winter. That's a big job, and fortunately, it never snowed enough to need it. But just the fact that he offered that one specific thing, took some worry out of our lives.

Many people these days grow up with no idea of what Christianity is about. And even some church members think being a Christian is about believing the right things, staying out of trouble and being good. That's how Christians get the reputation for being close-minded, judgmental, anti-gay and anti-life. It's not about being good! It's about forgiveness and generous, even extravagant, love. And that leads to life.

Can we love one another, and share love with our neighbors without having to have a life-threatening illness? I don't know. Maybe that's where we have to start. But don't stop there, because all God's children need to know that love. So let mutual love thrive and continue. That's what it's all about. And may God bless you.
Amen.