

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**

**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**

**Church Year C**

**Date: 5/22/16**

**Season: The Second Sunday after Pentecost (Trinity)**

**John 16:12-15, Romans 5:1-5**

I can't tell you how great it is to be back among you. Even though I've only been away three Sundays, it feels like thirty. Like a month of Sundays. That's because my absence was involuntary. I wasn't on vacation. Having major surgery – a new experience for me – spending five days in the hospital and then being pretty miserable as I recovered increased my longing for connection and reconnection with my community. With you.

So I'm very happy to be here today. Now many of you will be pleased to know that the sermon won't last very long. Speaking still requires a good deal of effort and I'm trying to be a careful steward of my physical resources. I'm in an interim period right now. This very successful surgery I've undergone has removed all the cancerous stuff from my throat and lymph system, but the docs aren't done with me yet. Beginning week after next, I'll start a 6-week course of radiation therapy. The good news is that, because of the successful surgery, the radiation will be at a much lower dose level than had I not had the surgery. And I won't need any of the very nasty chemotherapy drugs that usually accompany this kind of radiation. The not so good news is that, beginning about the second week of radiation and lasting through about two weeks after the treatment is completed, I'm going to be in some pretty significant discomfort and, I'm told, very, very tired. So I'm between heavy-weight fights. I've just gone 10 rounds with Sonny Liston. I'm resting and regaining my strength so I can go 10 rounds with Mohammed Ali. So while I'll be with you for at least two more Sundays and maybe even another after that, I'll be absent again probably until late July. While I'm not looking forward to the next eight weeks, I am really looking forward to a full and complete recovery. And that's what seems to be in the cards.

Now I've been learning – or maybe better stated – relearning some things in these months since I received the news that I have cancer. When I first got this unwelcome news, I was shocked, dismayed, confused, and yes, scared. Really scared. It all seemed so weird. Slowly that feeling of chaos began to give way to a kind of surrender. “OK, this is what's happening. What are you going to do about it? Are you going to live in denial and fear, or will you live positively, in hope?” Those were the unspoken questions in any heart. And then my dear sweet daughter, Barbara, said something very wise. When I called to deliver the news of my illness, she said, “Dad, there's learning in this for you. There's some transformation here.”

Well, of course she was on to something. So many of the great spiritual teachers will tell us that real transformation, authentic transformation, real movement towards the Heart of God, comes only through great suffering or great love. And that's been my own experience, both personally and as I've observed it in so many others over the years. It's either great love or great suffering. That's absolutely what the Apostle Paul is getting at in his letter to the little community of Christians in Rome, that we heard a moment ago. Through Christ, he says, we have obtained access to grace. And not **despite** our suffering by **because** of our suffering. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope, hope that does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into us through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Now, I, for one, will often try to avoid "character-building" events. After all, who likes to suffer? But sometimes, like in the case of a cancer diagnosis, you just don't get a choice. The choice we do get though, as I said a moment ago, is whether we respond in fear and denial and dread or to respond in hope. That's a choice we can make. And if we turn to Christ, as Paul says, we **will** find hope. Hope in the midst of all our suffering.

Now I want to be quick to add here that I know that many of you have greater experience than I with suffering and hope. Many of you have undergone more significant trials than the one I'm in the midst of. The courage – and the hope – with which I have watched you face these trials inspires me. That those of you who have undergone such great trials of your own have been so encouraging to me has been a real sign of love that is the key to hope.

And that's the second key to real, authentic spiritual transformation. Great Love. Great suffering and great love. I have been astounded and deeply humbled by the love I have experienced. From family, from friends near and far, and from this community. The love I have experienced from this St. Thomas community – from my community – has been humbling and transformative. This is a beloved community just like the little community of friends and believers to whom John the Evangelist was writing. You know, the gospel of John is really all about the formation of a beloved community of friends of Jesus. And in the piece we read a moment ago, we hear Jesus telling his friends that he will be leaving them and that they may very well endure suffering, but they won't be left alone. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will be with them, supporting them, sustaining them, transforming them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus, they will become the blessed Community.

In each card, each email, each call, each bowl of soup or pudding or tapioca or smoothie, I have received from you, I have received right along with it, the gift of the love of Christ and the healing power of the Holy Spirit. You have shown me – and continue to show me – a dimension of love that is transcendent and transformative. The love of Christ I am experiencing through you and in you is truly healing.

So I've found myself moving from the chaos of fear and dread to a place of surrender to the Real – which is where we will always meet God – to the place of hope – transformative hope in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of his beloved community – each one of you. Forward we go together. Forward we go with each of you who may have your own trials and suffering right now. Forward we go together in hope.

Thank you. Thank each one of you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Amen.