

“The Teacher”

PENTECOST 4

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Most of us regret one thing or another,
the key is do not have lasting regrets.

One such regret for me lately was
waiting until my vacation to read
a certain book.

If I would've read it earlier,
it would have been a selection
for my summer book studies.

So instead of regretting my lost opportunity,
let me share it with you now.

The book is *When Breath Becomes Air*,
the beautifully written memoir of a neurosurgeon.

Like another book we studied, *Being Mortal*
by another physician Atul Gawande,
it tells the story of an awakening.

Paul Kalanithi was a brilliant young man,
educated at Sandford and Yale.
who excelled in his medical training.

As a scientific practitioner, he had been told
and had fully embraced that
patients are problems and that the surgeon's
job is to eradicate the problem in
the best way possible.

The patient is not a person
but a tumor causing seizures.

The goal is to remove or control the tumor,
keeping the patient alive, but never

contemplating the life and relationships
that this person has.

However, just when Dr. Paul Kalanithi was
on the brink of being a successful surgeon,
he himself, became a patient,
struck tragically with brain cancer.

Dr. Kalanithi now saw things differently;
he was forced to look at disease and illness
not from the perspective of a problem-solving
surgeon but from that of the living,
yearning patient.

He could no longer imagine the patient as a
movie set, where the doctor plays out the
drama of fighting the disease, the surgeon
a Luke Skywalker and the cancer Dark Vader,
crossing light sabers as the unfortunate
patient passively hosts the battle.

Kalanithi came to the conclusion that
what he most longed for as a patient was
not the brilliant expertise of the surgeon
but the ministry of the surgeon's person.

Dr. Kalanithi recognized that the only way
to truly heal someone is to create the space
for them to share their story,
to give your person to them,
accompanying them in their journey of
illness that too often leads to death.

Kalanithi's job now, as a surgeon-patient,
was to be a pastor who creates space for
the ministry that shares deeply in personhood,
inviting the sharing of stories as much as
the articulation of diagnoses and procedures.

Dr. Kalanithi admitted, “Had I been more religious
in my youth, I might have become a pastor,
for it was the pastoral role I’d sought.”
It was the pastoral role he discovered through
his illness and transformation.

He sums this all up in this beautiful story
of his pastoral role as a physician:
“A thirty-five-year-old sat in her ICU bed,
a sheen of terror on her face.
She had been shopping for her sister’s birthday
when she’d had a seizure.
A scan showed that a benign brain tumor
was pressing on her right frontal lobe.
But then I could see that the idea of
brain surgery terrified her, more than most.
She was lonesome and in a strange place,
having been swept out of the familiar hubbub
of a shopping mall and into the alien beeps
and alarms and antiseptic smells of an ICU
She would likely refuse surgery if I launched into
a detached spiel detailing all the risks
and possible complications.
I could do so, document her refusal in the charts.
consider my duty discharged, and move on...
Instead, with her permission, I gathered
her family with her, and together we calmly
talked through her options.
As we talked, I could see the enormousness of
the choices she faced dwindle into a difficult
but understandable decision.
I had met her in a space where she was a person,
instead of a problem to be solved.
She chose surgery. The operation went smoothly.

She went home in two days and never seized again" (p.90)

Paul Kalanithi was transformed into a pastoral
physician, finding his destiny.

But this book would not end happily ever after.

His cancer overtook him making it impossible
for him to continue his work

To his recently born daughter Cady, he wrote her
a letter containing the stories of others,
the deepest expressions of gratitude of
what he learned from them, and the
reminder to never think of her life as meaningless.

Kalanithi's book became a best seller,
because it points to something profound
that we're all longing for: a sense that
there is something binding our experience
and the universe itself together.

Books like this one can renew one's sense
of purpose.

The book I had planned to share this morning
was one that I have never preached on.

In fact, I had long ignored Proverbs along
with Ecclesiastes.

When I read from them, I became easily bored.

If I had purchased a new Bible from which Proverbs
had been omitted, it would have been some
time before I would have noticed the omission

The omission or lack of interest was not accidental.

If you would ask me why, I would offer two things:

first, Proverbs is more secular than theological to me.

The name of God could be eliminated completely,
and the material would not be greatly altered

The deepest conditions of our being-faith, sin,

salvation, guilt, forgiveness, resurrection-are absent.
It didn't seem to me that Proverbs was interested
in the activities and realities of God, the way
the rest of scripture is.

The second reason I would give for my ignorance
of Proverbs is its impersonal intellectualism.

There is hardly a word about faith.

There are no names or stories.

Nothing like the story of Abraham, for instance.

Abraham taking Isaac to Mount Moriah,
tying him up, placing him on an altar
built by the woods the father made the son to carry
and going through the horrible preparations
for killing his only son as a sacrifice to God-
a chilling and awful story.

We feel the enormous fear, the strangling anxiety,
the incredible obedience in the face of all odds
in that intense focus on Abraham and Isaac.

Or when Scripture tells us how salvation is accomplished.

With an abstract theory of atonement?

No. We have a story that has come to us in
the form of a Passion-the story of Jesus
Christ crucified on a rough wooden cross,
at a place that used to be known as Mt. Moriah,
where he is left suspended to die.

The story is written with detail and insight
You can almost hear the nails go through
the hands and feet, the ripping of flesh
and listen to the last words of abandonment:
"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

No theological abstractions, but a story
and a bloody story at that.

The German intellectual beast, Fredrick Nietzsche
wrote, "All truth is bloody truth to me."
That was certainly the case for Jesus.
That is, every truth has to be lived, not just talked about.
For us, for me, Scripture has to be moveable, readable,
God-revealing but at the same time a human-
affirming document like Dr. Kalanithi's story.

But I missed this in Proverbs.
No names. No events. No story.
Just this endless compilation of sayings
It seemed like the kind of thing an old man
put together in a rocking chair on his front porch.
There might be some savvy, observed wisdom,
but there wasn't any life to it.
Nothing of the personal and God-revealing vitality
that I was used to in Scripture.
There was not enough God and human life there.
But in order for me to include this book in this
series, I have obviously changed my mind.
When I reflect back on my formation and
performance as a pastor, I have sought out
people who have experiences that I haven't had.
I wanted to learn by their example; and over
the years I have encountered many wise people.
Some were learned people and some were not.
Over the years I began to realize in the conversations
in the classroom or the nursing home,
the wisdom I heard was similar to Proverbs.

Not everything I was learning or relearning for
ministry was coming from a book or lecture.
I was being tutored by a chain-smoking
curmudgeon who unconditionally loved

his down-syndrome daughter;
a middle-aged man recovering from a heart attack
a mother who quit her nurse's job to care for terminally-ill
five-year-old son;
by a family struggling in poverty.

In other words, by the picture on our bulletin
cover, by hearing lady wisdom crying
aloud in the sheets (1:20)

And isn't that the human situation where
God is graciously at work- in the everyday
workplaces, hospital rooms, playgrounds,
food pantries, and family rooms-"the streets"?

It took me a long time to arrive here.

I hope you grasped it sooner than I did.

You see our secular lives are permeated by grace.

Even the nonreligious aspects of our lives are
included in the Word of God.

Proverbs is the biblical statement that everything-
insects, spouses, child-rearing, overeating,
every detail of life-is of importance to God.

Proverbs puts into Scripture, and therefore
into our lives, all those details we might
suppose are of no importance to God,
and therefore unaffected by grace:
the way we speak to a friend,
the disruptions of a family relationship,
the loss of meaning and purpose in our jobs,
the confused goals in our professions,
our feelings of inadequacy, our doubts and struggles.

Beloved people of God,

"Wisdom cries aloud in the street."

she is not hiding away in an elite university,

not reserved for grey-bearded white men or
those lucky possessors of highly endowed brains,
nor confined to a long-ignored book of lists.

She cries aloud in the streets, the same streets
we drive to school, the supermarket, the office, or church.

Jesus expresses the dominant themes of Proverbs
and fulfilled it when he told his followers:

“I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly.”

As Dr. Paul Kalanithi himself, discovered,
what we are called to do in life is help
others live their lives well.

God gives us wisdom to live life abundantly
all we need to do is ask for it.

The brother of the Lord, James, made this promise.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God,
who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it
will be given to you.” (1:5).

AMEN