

*The Stress of Life*

Shepherd's Grace Church

August 14, 2016

<sup>49</sup>"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

<sup>54</sup>He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. <sup>56</sup>You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12: 49-56) (Also Read Isaiah 5:1-7)

Note: This is the first in a three week series on stress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will draw much from scripture but also from contemporary issues to help gain understanding of how stress exists and some of the positive and negative effects it can have on individuals and on society as a whole. This week we will deal with stress as it relates to others. Next week, we will examine stress and its effects on society and finally we will look at our own lives and examine some of the ways stress comes into our lives and how we live and work with it.

We begin today in the vineyard. Perhaps this is an appropriate place to begin. I mean, alcohol is one way individuals react to stress. This is not a temperance lecture, however, but immediately we find some problems in the vineyard. The planting the Lord did, the preparation and purposeful cultivation have somehow gone awry. What was supposed to be pleasing and positive has somehow turned sour.

All the right steps were taken in building the vineyard. Hedges were planted, towers erected, presses laid in and the best fruit found for startings. Yet, even with all this care and concern things did not go exactly as planned.

As we hear the story from our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, we can relate can't we? When we get out of bed in the morning, most of us have the very best of intentions! We fully intend to do our best, give our best to our families, our work, our God! And then the day begins! All the plans, all the dreams, all the good intentions cannot control the uncontrollable! Someone once said, "Stress happens because we try to control those things we cannot control."

We recognize on our drive to work that we have no control over the driver who waits till the very last second to move into the correct lane to allow for road construction. We recognize by coffee break that we have no control over the request the boss just made for a report that wasn't due till next week. We recognize that we have no control over the part for the combine that was supposed to be in today but is delayed in shipping. While we recognize all these things, we find ourselves slowly, or sometimes rapidly forgetting the good intentioned service we so confidently climbed out of bed with just a few short hours ago. More and more frequently in 21<sup>st</sup> century work-a-day world we find ourselves beginning to feel stress build up. We find our day starting to sour just as certainly as the grapes that sprung up in the Lord's vineyard!

There was once a psychiatrist giving a lecture to a night school class. As she stood from the desk she took a glass that was partially filled with water. The class immediately anticipated her question. She was going to ask, is the glass half-empty or half-full? The class was wrong. Instead, the lecturer asked how heavy the liquid was in the glass.

Surprised but eager to answer a different question, the class began to blurt out answers. Four ounces, six ounces, sixteen ounces they called out and the psychiatrist stopped them after a time. She said, "what if I told you the answer depends?" The class was perplexed but intrigued as I hope you are right now.

The lecturer proceeded, "What if I told you the weight of the glass would vary depending upon the length of time you are asked to hold it?" The point she was making is that if you are only asked to hold the glass for a minute it doesn't weigh very much. If you are asked to hold the glass for five minutes, it gets considerably heavier. If you have to hold the glass for an hour, your arm will start to ache. If you have to hold the glass for a day, it will become so heavy you will likely drop it.

Even though the glass does not get any heavier, the longer you have to hold on to it the harder it becomes to manage. The way we handle stress is exactly the same. The longer we hold on to it, the heavier it becomes for us. Once we realize the delay caused by the driver or the report or the combine part is beyond our control, once we let go of it, the load lightens and we can begin to re-focus on the conviction we had in the beginning.

God expected the sweetness of justice. That is after all, what God planted. Instead he got from his plantings the soured taste of tears. Once God recognized his planting had not yielded the desired result, he let go. His letting go is our great blessing. As we discovered a couple of weeks ago in Luke 11, God's letting go, God's recognizing some of God's chosen people had soured on God's word to them opened the door for the Gentiles to become part of the planting.

God refused to feel the stress! God is, after all, God! God knows exactly when to let go and when to hold on. He knows the fullness of the passage from Ecclesiastes 3. To everything, there is a season. A time to build up and a time to tear down, a time to add and a time to subtract. We humans struggle with this concept. Letting go is hard! It is hard for us and it is harder still for us to allow in others!

So often, we approach others with our agenda on our mind. We forget there are problems in this world, in other people's lives that we know nothing about. Some of these problems are as simple as the person who cut them off in traffic or the part that did not arrive on time but many, for them as well as for us are more complex. They are difficult to compartmentalize. That is, they often stay on a person's mind as that person is dealing with other people. Stress occurs when the person can't let the problem go...when they can't put the cup down. This, I believe is where we encounter the words of the evangelist Luke this morning.

To many, the passage we have from Luke for today is troubling. We hear the words of Jesus according to Luke and we do not hear the healer, the miracle worker, the master preacher. Instead we hear a person. We like to hear what we heard at the end of Isaiah this morning. God, recognizing that God needed to let go, and doing what God needed to do. That is what God is expected to do and Jesus is God...Right! We are comforted by Jesus as God! We know that when he is fully God, He can take on the sins of the world! He can take on the problems of the world! He can take on the problems of me!...or you!...or us!

Our passage for today is difficult because it paints the other side of Jesus. Jesus, the fully human is talking to us today and to some degree, this Jesus scares us just a little. This Jesus embodies what John the gospel writer says in chapter one of his gospel. The word became flesh and walked among us. When the word became flesh, the word took on all the worldly characteristics of flesh. He, Jesus, took on all the struggles, all the trials, all the temptations that we all deal with every day. As we see him this morning, he is holding on to the cup that he has apparently been holding for awhile. When we meet him today, the cup is getting heavy!

The cup will get too heavy for this Jesus! He will ask at the end of Luke's gospel to have the cup taken from him. He will pray and he will cry and he will sweat even drops of blood, so heavy has this cup become! Today we meet him as the cup is starting to strain his arm and still we are put off! This fully human Jesus is just not very appealing to us. Imagine for just a moment, how unappealing we must seem to him. When we are confronted by stress in others it can be ugly!

We don't like our God ugly. We like our God clean and wearing white coming on clouds with bands of angels singing Joy to the World (One of the songs we sang in church this Sunday morning). We like our God in command and control. There is a reason,

however that we should like our Jesus as we see him this morning. That reason is to remind us that he knows, he understands and he lives the stress and pressure we feel. He did not just become flesh to Lord it over us that He could live a perfect life. He became flesh to know what it was like to live our life. That is the life he took to the cross! That is the life he had to know! That is the life he had to embrace and today we catch a glimpse of that life, that fully fleshy human life that looks so much like ours that it frightens us more than a little.

Jesus said, I came to bring a fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled. John Wesley theologized that this fire was the fire of love shed abroad in our hearts. There is no doubt that Jesus came and continues to come to share this love in the hope that it will kindle a passion for others in us, but before we leap to this kind of love, I believe there is more to consider.

The fire we are to consider first is a fire for God! The leaders of the day have let this fire go cold! They have substituted law for love and rule for religion! They are so concerned with how they worship that they have forgotten why they worship! They are concerned with when Jesus healed (remember he healed on the Sabbath which was against the rules Luke 11) and with his table manners (he did not wash before he ate Luke 11) but they are not interested in his ministry! Jesus has come to a dark cold world to bring the light of God and the warmth of God's passion to the world. This is the fire he wants to see kindled!

In Chapter 9, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the top of the mountain where he is transfigured. There he is told of the baptism with which he is to be baptized. There he is told of the final chapters of the mission he must complete. From that moment on, he set his fact toward Jerusalem and the cross and the grave. From that moment on there was a tension in his life that he held on to.

Tension is not always bad. In fact, some tension is necessary. When I go for a run in the morning, I take the dog with me. I could just take the leash but I am wondering, "have you ever tried to push a leash?" Without the dog at the other end the leash will not stay out in front. It will get tangled with my feet and I will probably fall down! With the dog at the other end there is a tension in the leash. The dog helps me hold the leash taught and keeps it from becoming entangled in my steps.

You could say, "why doesn't he just leave the leash at home?" I don't leave the leash at home because if I take the dog, the city tells me I have to have the dog on the leash. The run would not be as enjoyable without the dog! So, I take the leash because it is part of the run. Jesus takes the cross because it is part of the mission. It adds tension but that tension keeps the full purpose of the journey in front of him. The tension is essential to the journey.

In my run, without tension, I cannot always tell where the dog is. With the tension, I can feel the pull and we can work together to stay on the path. In this same way, the cross pulls Jesus to the completion of the mission. It keeps him on the path and because it is always in front of him he can keep putting one foot in front of the other. Just as Oliver and I work together to complete our morning run in the dark hours of the day, Jesus and the cross work together to accomplish the task he has been called to.

Because he is fully human, however, he feels the stress of the cross. It pulls at him as he walks the path. When Oliver and I run, there are places where he wants to pull me off the path and in a direction I cannot go. We run along a lakeshore and there are times he wants to pull me right into the lake. I have to pull and tug to keep him on the path to where we need to go. At another place there are ducks and geese. I really have to pull at this place. There are times when he is almost more than I can bear as he tugs and strains at the leash. The stress wears me out and gets me off my pace. My breathing is more labored and my time slows.

We do not know the struggles of Jesus as he walks the path to Jerusalem. We know he accepts the burden but in today's passage, we hear him speak. He is under tremendous pressure to complete his journey. Just as Oliver tugs at me to get me off the path and on a different course, so also there are things that tug at Jesus. In chapter 9 he sets his fact toward Jerusalem. His disciples, James and John want to destroy a village for their lack of support. Jesus has to rebuke them. He has to remind them and us that his message is not one of hate or judgment but one of redemption. How frustrating to know he is walking to his death, a death for the sins of the world, while his message of love has not been received even by those closest to him.

In chapter 11, he is praying. When he is finished, his disciples ask him to teach them to pray. He recognizes in their request that they do not pray for the kingdom or for God's will but for their own needs. He reminds them and us that our prayers serve to let God lead us and not vice versa! How frustrating to find that he has to remind us again and again to trust God for our daily bread.

Later in the gospel, the stress will overwhelm Jesus. He will pray for his own deliverance. He will ask that the cup of the cross pass him by. He has been holding it for too long and it has become unbearably heavy. In another moment of human struggle, he will ask to lay it down. So dire is his request that as he prays, he sweats blood. He is terrified at the prospect not only of the pain but also of the responsibility.

As we learn today of Jesus stress there are two things I believe we should consider. First is the fact that we do not always know the burdens others bear. Many of us are married. We are closer to our spouse than to anyone else in the world, yet even in this closeness we do not always know all the pressures of the person we are talking to.

In my wife's job, she often has situations with children which, because of privacy issues she cannot talk about, even to me. She carries these responsibilities with great dignity and a keen sense of responsibility. Never the less, they weigh on her. They occupy a part of her mind even as she deals with the day to day responsibilities of being my wife and a wonderful mother. They affect her attention at times and cause her to make choices that I do not always understand. She has a baptism, a responsibility to teach and help the children who are part of her class. She puts a pressure on herself to see that responsibility through to its completion.

Her dedication and the stress it places on her is not a bad thing. It helps many children each year to learn and become more able to think for themselves. It helps many parents better raise their children. It helps all of us to have a more engaged community in the future. It also creates a barrier at times between others and her. She has to carry her responsibility for some of these children privately. She has to work with things which we, those closest to her cannot know.

One of Jesus' messages to us today as he reminds us of his stress is that others often carry with them things which we cannot know. We cannot know when a parent is dealing with a difficult child. We cannot know when a friend is dealing with a difficult issue at work. We cannot know when a member of our congregation is dealing with the health of a friend or family member.

Stress is a part of each person's life. It is necessary and it is even helpful. It creates a tension that pulls a person out of bed each morning. It creates a sense of responsibility and purpose. It pulls and tugs just as Oliver's leash pulls and tugs at me while we run. It keeps us going. Stress, however causes us to react in ways that can be sometimes unexpected.

When we are dealing with stress, we can be distracted occasionally in our daily encounters. We can give an unexpected response or ignore a request that we would not normally ignore. When this happens with a friend or family member, it can be unsettling for us. We are unaccustomed to having our good friends, people with whom we are in a close relationship react in unpredictable ways.

Part of the lesson Jesus teaches is that when we are with others whom we care about, we need to be aware that they are often carrying burdens we know nothing about. When they react differently than we expect in a given situation, instead of assuming their reaction is about us, perhaps we can cut them some slack. Perhaps we can walk along side them allowing them the space they need to deal with the distraction of their stress without creating additional stress for them. Perhaps we can be a good friend and let them know that we will as Jesus tells us in chapter 9 of Luke's gospel, take up our cross and walk with them. Perhaps we can know in this way that the cross Jesus speaks of is the same one he takes up, a cross of love; a cross that goes beyond our own needs

and daily bread to a genuine caring for others and their needs. This is the cross we bear, it is the cross we must bear! It is the only cross that completely separates us as Christians from others. It is a cross of love!

The second lesson we learn from Jesus today is a lesson in humility. The passage we are studying is difficult. It is difficult because it forces us to see Jesus in a different way. It forces us to recognize that Jesus made a choice to come and walk among us. It forces us to wrestle with our own discomfort at God displaying human emotions.

Perhaps, this morning we can turn it a different way. Perhaps instead of dealing with our discomfort we can recognize God's great gift! What an incredible gesture God makes when he takes on human form. Now, God can feel, touch, smell, taste, hear our emotions for himself. Now God can know what stress feels like for human beings. Now God can know the pain of a suffering mother as she watches her child struggle with illness! Now God can know the heartache of a father who is struggling to pay the bills so his family can live and grow together. Now God can know the hurt of being bullied on the schoolyard and also the insecurity of the bully.

You see, we do not serve a God who is distant and disengaged from our world. We serve a God who loves us enough to become flesh and walk among us so He might know our pain and our joy! We serve a God who cares enough to embrace our struggles in his own right so that when we go to Him in prayer we can know He can relate to us. WE serve a God who does not need us to hold back or talk around issues that concern us, thinking that God cannot possibly understand. We serve a God who can and does understand because he has experienced the stress of human existence. He has tasted heartache and hurt and stress. He has faced alienation and abandonment and He can relate to our feelings as we come to him to cry out or celebrate.

We serve a God who teaches us about stress by living a life filled with a stress which we cannot possibly imagine. In His time on earth, God in Jesus Christ experienced the full measure of our emotions and struggles. He comes so we might know and believe and trust in God's desire to have a full relationship with us! Today we sing Joy to the World as an expression not just of Christmas but as a recognition that God has come to walk among us and relate to us.

Some see him as weak in his human form. I say, "What a mighty God we serve!" He is mighty in his humility, giving us the opportunity to grown closer to God as we deal with the *Stress of Life! Amen!*