

The Stress of Life Part 3

Pressure and Purpose

Shepherd's Grace Church

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On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" ⁴But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" ⁶And they could not reply to this.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14: 1-14) (Also Read Jer. 2: 4-13)

This is the third in a series of three Sundays we will spend on stress. As the seasons change from the laid back slow pace of summer to the cooler, quicker season of fall where changes are noticeable and life begins to anticipate a period of productivity it seems a good time to examine the ways we interact with others and the way we process those interactions for ourselves. As we head back to school, back to work, back to huge holidays and heavy family and financial commitment; as we head toward a presidential election and the national debate that goes with it, we find ourselves being pulled in many different directions. Stress is the product of this pulling. I believe it occurs in three areas.

Two weeks ago, we talked about stress in others. Sometimes, when people are experiencing pain and problem in their life they will react in ways that seem out of character for them. These reactions can sometimes be hurtful to us or to others. Jesus tried to point out these kinds of reactions using himself as an example. He reminded us

of the stress he was under to complete the mission God had called him to. He reminded us of the choice He made to become fully human, to take on all the emotion and frailty of a human being.

In taking on this nature, he experienced the stress that we experience. I defined that stress as a tension. Tension pulls tight at the events of our lives. It can be good in that it keeps us on a particular path. It can be challenging in that it pulls in directions that we often do not want to travel. For Jesus, both these pulls were evidenced. He experienced stress from the cross. It loomed large for him, ever in front of him pulling him to a pain and heartache that he found, at times, overwhelming. He prayed for the tension to pass him by! He reacted to others who did not know his stress in ways that seemed out of character. He talked to them of division and difficulty when they expected to hear messages of peace and harmony.

On the other hand, he also modeled a means of submitting to the tension. He prayed, "not my will but Thy will be done," as a part of the same prayer. He surrendered to the will of God that would rightly restore relationship between God and humanity. In his surrender, we learned grace and love. In his surrender, we learned that we cannot always know what is going on in another person's life so when they react in unexpected ways, we might be more aware of the tensions pulling at them and more tolerant of their stress. In our tolerance, we might be able to not only learn but live together divided by our differences of opinion but strengthened in our support of one another.

Last week, we talked about stress as an emphasis. We learned that the way we emphasize words and phrases in society can have a critical impact on the society as a whole and on our relationships with one another! When we bark at the dog for doing something we do not want the dog to do, sometimes the dog barks back!

I shared with you last week that sometimes our dog doesn't need much prompting to do what we want him to do. He is eager to please or participate. When I say, "Oliver, let's go for a run," for example, he beats me to the bottom of the stairs and whines and moans until I get my shoes on. When I say, "Oliver, stay out of the trash," he totally ignores me. It is not until I raise my voice and make a move that he understands I expect a different reaction.

As I stress to him the need for a change in behavior, sometimes he submits; more often he ignores because he does not see the benefit. So it is for Jesus in Luke 13. He heals on the Sabbath and people are both appalled and overjoyed. They are appalled because he has not kept the Sabbath day holy. They are overjoyed because they see a neighbor in distress who has been cured from her ailment!

The leader of the synagogue speaks to their outrage. He argues that in this society, there are six days to work but the Sabbath is to be kept holy. His debate places

emphasis on the day and its sacred place in their lives. Jesus, on the other hand argues that the Sabbath is not only a day but a state of mind. It is a time when we stop and reflect on God's work in our lives. It is a time when we recognize love as our primary purpose. It is a day when we pray for our neighbors and yes, when we demonstrate love for those in need.

The debate is one of stress. The leader of the synagogue stresses rules. Jesus stresses state of mind. Who is right? Is there a matter of degree? How will we make our decision? Sin is sin...right? That is the nature of the stress we face in society. We want black and white. We do not like gray! We expect answers from our leaders, our churches, our parents and friends! We do not expect stress!

Jesus gives us stress. He gives us emphasis! He argues that in society, in a culture where people are trying to get along together there are priorities. His priority is always love. How do we love one another? How do we choose to get along together? The nature of his debate is to stress the Sabbath as a day on which God is honored and glorified in worship and in love and in care for those around us. These things, he says are not work. They are life itself!

Jesus stresses, emphasizes that debate is healthy, it is clarifying, it is purposeful. It is not demeaning or derogatory.

As we live and work in a society that seeks black and white, it is good to find a little gray where we can clarify our own thinking and recognize that all people are our neighbors; all people are created in the image and likeness of God; all people are valued and have valuable opinions worthy of consideration. We do not have to adopt them but when we hear the stress of their argument, we can perhaps find compromise that is for the better of all. Stress as an emphasis invites society to move and change and grow, not by lifting one group ahead of others but by inviting all to actively participate in a world where we are stronger by hearing all ideas and discussing their merit as opposed to demeaning their author. Stress as emphasis can be healthy for society. It can invite us all to know that the solidarity of our differences can be one of our greatest assets.

Today, we come to the final segment of our series on stress. We come to the stress we experience for ourselves. I am calling this stress pressure. In the text from Jeremiah this morning we see this pressure clearly. The people, pressured by the world around them and chosen that which seems easy. They have worshiped possessions and human power and greed. They have turned from the promises of God to the persuasions of other gods.

The stress they feel is self-imposed. They look around at the seeming success of other nations and they want what the others seem to have. They take a short sighted approach to wealth and happiness, forgoing the eternal promise of God who has to this

point, provided a promised land, led them out of slavery and bondage, and provided leadership that has made them the envy of every nation on earth.

I hope this passage is sounding familiar. Here we sit today, in a 21st century nation that is the envy of all other nations on earth. These other nations may not agree with the means we have used to gain our wealth but they admire the principles of freedom and justice that are supposed to guide our actions. We think other nations, other people, immigrants and refugees want to come to our country because they see a clear path to wealth and prosperity. The reality is that others come to this country because they see a people who care for one another. They respond to our principles and not our principle; our wealth. They seek justice and an opportunity to be treated with dignity and respect!

We look around and see the pressure on declining resources and react as early Israel, forsaking our principles and God's guidance for the sake of short term material gain. We want material gain and we want it now so we can hide it and hoard it and hold on to it as some kind of measure of our success. We would like to believe this is an nationalistic ambition, an ambition of manifest destiny. We would like to ignore the same ambition in the people of Israel and claim that we are different. We are entitled. We are a bright nation shining in the sun. The reality is that we are the same! We are not nationalistic. We are individualistic. We are selfish and stubborn and we have turned from our God to worship other gods.

We would like to think the stress we place on our lives is the pressure of our nation; that we all aspire to a common goal. We would like to believe that the current state of our personal stress is a function of the words of our declaration of independence, "That we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and those rights include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness!" The reality is that our stress has become individualized. We no longer look to the common good but instead we look to the good for the common. We place pressure on ourselves to produce more and more and more so we can demonstrate our success by what we have. This stress is not new. It is the same stress that caused the fall of Israel in Jeremiah's time and of virtually every other nation that has moved to prominence in the history of the world!

This move from caring, one for another, from caring for justice and righteousness is a move away from the one true God. Amos asks the question, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God!" God does not require that we produce wealth for ourselves and hoard it from others. God simply asks that we follow God's commands and seek to help others do the same. We place stress on ourselves and pressure on our lives when we do otherwise. I believe this is where the Gospel lesson for this week intersects with the stress or pressure we place on our own lives.

Once again, Luke has provided Jesus as our illustration. In our lesson for today, Jesus finds himself being closely observed. In the part of the passage not read, Jesus asks for reflection from the religious leaders. Should healing be done on the Sabbath, he wants to know. They had no answer for him. Perhaps they remembered how effective his debating techniques were from the previous lesson where he overcame objections from the leader of the synagogue and redefined the spirit of the Sabbath. Perhaps they had just never considered the question. In any case, they had no answer so he healed and headed on in to dinner.

They were watching him closely, putting pressure on him to perform according to Jewish law...at least their interpretation of Jewish law. His healing caused them to call into question what the intent of the law was. Was there to be no work or were they to do those things which served God by serving others? Jesus was being scrutinized as a teacher, expected to provide leadership on the issue.

We are called to ponder the bigger picture here. We are invited to ask how we might react while being closely watched. Tamara Bucher offered an illustration on face book this week. She shared, "A teacher wrote the math tables for multiplication of the number 9. $1 \times 9 = 7$ $2 \times 9 = 18$ $3 \times 9 = 27$ $4 \times 9 = 36$ and so on. When the teacher finished the class was pointing and laughing at the mistake she made in the very first equation. She looked at them and said, I intentionally wrote the first equation incorrectly but I wrote the next 9 exactly right. What kind of comment on society is it, she wondered where people point and laugh at one mistake and forget about everything else a person has done well.

The world does watch us very closely! The world has expectations of us as individuals and we experience pressure or stress from those expectations. Today we watch as Jesus teaches us how to respond. His teaching tool is a parable. A parable is a story with a point beyond the obvious. Usually it requires careful attention to the detail of the story and a keen sense of justice as the component for complete understanding. While the simplistic nature of today's parable may not rise to the level of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, it is no different.

Jesus observes people scurrying for the place of honor at the banquet he is attending. As he observes, it becomes clear to him that all are under a great deal of pressure to produce credential for the highest seat at the table, the one closest to the host and therefore the one of greatest honor. I imagine the conversation he hears in 21st century language: "What was your income last year?" "How did that stock tip I gave you pay off" "We just bought our third house in the Hamptons. It was a bit pricey but I am sure we will make wonderful use of it on the weekends!" "We just reduced overhead in our company by firing 1300 people. It will be tough on them but our stockholders love us!"

Each of these comments are intended to impress people more than the last. Each might be made by one of the people vying for the highest place, the seat of honor. Each makes boast of individual success and worth. Each illustrates the pressure people are under to impress others and gain favor with those even more "prestigious" than themselves. As Jesus observes these comments he is reminded that none reflect the nature of an individual. None represents character or integrity. All represent service to other gods. All tie clearly to the passage today from Jeremiah 2.

With this context in mind, Jesus begins the parable. "When you are invited to a wedding banquet, do not seek the place of greatest honor, for the host just might have invited someone more distinguished than you." Translation: Personal pride places great stress on potential success! The sin of pride is one to which hardly anyone will admit. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* says, "Pride is the one sin which people recognize in others but almost never in themselves." As Jesus is telling the parable, people are thinking of polite table manners. People are looking around at one another pointing fingers and laughing at the ones who would seek the highest places.

In the 21st century context, those who sit in the church pews are the ones who look around and laugh. It is us, those of us who come every Sunday who somehow believe we have a superior grasp on salvation. We think because we are in worship, giving praise and glory to God, we are above the lecture of Jesus this morning!

The reality is that we are the very ones who need to hear the message most! We are proud that we got up early on a Sunday. We are proud that we have come to profess our faith. We are proud that we have brought our joys and concerns. We are proud that we have made our offerings...and yet, it is not what we have brought but what we have not brought that convicts us.

We have not brought our hearts. We have not brought our lives. Instead, we have offered tokens. We are similar to the publican who looks at the tax collector in Luke 18 and says, "Thank you God for not making me like him!" We expect our salvation. It is our promise and our right!

What we forget is that what we have, what we hold on to is not a right. What we have is instead a gift! Our salvation is not something God has to grant. It is something God chooses to grant. It is Grace...God's riches at Christ's Expense! This grace is given freely and yet those of us who choose to receive it believe that somehow we have paid for it with our sacrifice!

When Jesus says, "When you are invited, do not sit at the highest place" as a reminder that we are not the ones who choose our place. We are the lowest, the least deserving and it is only by the grace of God that we are present in the first place. "All of us have

sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” and all of us deserve the penalty of our sin. Lest we need not be reminded, the wages of sin is death! That is what we deserve!

But, thanks be to God, we have received an invitation to the banquet. When we arrive, we should not assume we have a right to be there. In Luke 14.25 and forward, Jesus reminds us that we are the ones on the streets invited to come only because those who should have been there refused. We, the gentiles, the unchosen have become the chosen because the ones who knew the fullness of God’s promise rejected that promise, rejected Messiah, and rejected God’s incredible grace for themselves. Therefore, when we come, we should come, aware of our place.

The pressure of this profound understanding should provide a stress for us, a stress in which we live our daily lives! This stress is a positive stress. It serves as a reminder that we do not live of ourselves but we live for Christ alone. The pressure of living for Christ keeps us humble. It reminds us that we are always unworthy except for His incredible act of sacrifice that takes away our sin. In our humility, we put pressure on ourselves to come forward, to worship and to give thanks. We must never forget our place. Yes, we are children of God but not because of anything we have done. As we recognize this from our places of humility, from the lowest places, from places of service then we can be asked to move up higher because of all God has done for us!

The stress we find ourselves facing more frequently in this world is not good stress however. It is the stress of believing that somehow we are the ones in charge. We believe that somehow our lives are in our control and we determine our destiny. When we assume this belief the weight of the world seems to rest upon our shoulders. Indeed, the weight, the stress of everyday living does rest upon our shoulders. We have assumed that which Christ took on for us. We have taken up our own sin and in pride we have believed there is something we can do to justify our own worth, not only in the presence of others but also of God!

It is this stress that causes contention in our lives. This pressure has no release. When we choose to assume our own mantle of control we will forever contend to do more, have more, want more for our own gain. It is this pressure that motivates us to sit at the head of the table and this pressure that will cause us to move in disgrace to the lower places when others more distinguished than we arrive.

Jesus is clear this morning. There will always be those more distinguished than those who would claim honor for themselves. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted! Negative pressure or stress comes from our failure to recognize our own insufficiency! Stress comes from believing that somehow we can move up to our own salvation.

Jesus pushes this message still further as he takes on those who have much. To the host, He says, do not invite those who have the ability to repay you. Instead invite those who can never repay. Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and give as you have been given to. Remember that you have nothing except by God's grace and from all you have, give all you can to those who have less than you. In this way you will receive your reward.

We live with stress everyday. It can be a positive motivating factor in our lives. It can remind us that the pressure we perceive is a privilege. It is the privilege of service and in that privilege we provide an example of the one who came to serve us! From this stress, we can strive to a higher purpose! That purpose is to come on Sunday, to praise and honor God from a position of humility, sitting not at the front of the table but at the places of least honor.

You already know this though don't you. You know it instinctively because most of you choose to sit at the back of the church, removed from the pressure of the front row. As God watches where you sit this morning, God assumes you have succumbed to the pressure of purpose and that you indeed are willing to follow Jesus, the one who gave everything so you could have a seat at the table! Amen!