

“Everything Will Be All Right”

I have to begin with a slight caveat: I may well cry during the course of this. But it will not be because I am sad; it will be because I am always so overcome with gratitude every time I remember what I am going to share with you.

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask it of Him.”

To me, this is one of the most important passages in the Bible. It tells us that we must trust, completely and irrevocably, in God’s design for us; that what we *want* when we pray is not the issue – it is what God wants *for* us. It tells us that our prayers should be an ongoing request for what God knows we need. It tells us that our greatest joy should be found in surrendering to the overwhelming Love that is God’s will, even though it may not seem at all like Love.

Joy. We all long for joy. I am a member of the Pastoral Search Committee, and the one thing we have heard again and again from the congregation is that people long for a sense of joy in our worship. But I think joy is different from mere happiness in that while a circumstance or an individual can make us happy, true joy can only be experienced if we have a hand in creating that joy; that true, deeply known joy is only real when it is a shared joy that is reflected back to us. And the greatest joy can be nothing less than that which is reflected back to us from God Himself.

But if this is the case, then the question is: How can I possibly create joy in God? God is the creator of all things – including me. But maybe this is part of what Jesus was talking about when in John, chapter 10, He quotes Psalm 82: “Is it not written in your law, I said, ‘Ye are gods’?” Perhaps He was telling us that we too are *creators* through the mind of God – alone among God’s creatures we have the ability to create joy in our Creator.

So then the question becomes: how do we create joy in God? What is the greatest offering we can make? What makes God joyous? I would like to suggest that it is gratitude.

We often thank God in our hymns and prayers, but how often are our prayers nothing but an expression of gratitude? How much more often are they – if we are honest – “please give me this” “please give me from that” “please do this for me” “please save me”? And there is nothing wrong with asking of God – God wants us to ask – to knock, so that He may answer. But what joy it must give Him when we say simply “thank you”. And how much infinitely greater joy it

must give Him when we say “thank you” when He would be expecting us to say “please”.

I want to tell you a little bit about my late husband, David, as it was my life with him that taught me to say “thank you” when I wanted to say “please”. David was a truly remarkable man, but we would be married for over 15 years before I would realize exactly how remarkable. And because I have a feeling some of you may be curious about him after you hear this, I have put a picture of him and some of his work on the table in the narthex.

David was a commercial fisherman. We lived in WA state, but he fished here in Alaska, longlining halibut and black cod, and gillnetting salmon out at Area M, for those of you who know the salmon fisheries. Fishing was his life. When I met him, he was living on his boat, fishing year round, moving up and down the coast from the Aleutians to Mexico, fishing albacore tuna south of Washington. When we married he quit fishing year round as he loved finally having a real home and family, but he would be gone to Alaska every year from early May until late September. I always knew that fishing, his boat and the sea were as necessary to him as air to breathe.

Then in 1997, he came home in the fall with a numb spot in his left foot. To make a very long story a little shorter, it turned out to be caused by a malignant brain tumor; except this tumor wasn't in his brain, but in the nerve cells of his lower spinal cord - a primary cancer so rare that there weren't even case histories for his doctors to consult; his neurosurgeon told us that he had only heard it briefly mentioned in medical school, more as a hypothetical than anything else. Dr. Wright rushed him into surgery a few days later to see if anything could be done, but the prognosis was devastating: there was no way to excise the tumor, and in 12-18 months the cancer would grow up through the cells of the spinal cord, slowly taking out his ability to walk, to stand, to eat, to breathe, until his heart would finally fail. He didn't need to tell us the pain would be unbelievable - we could see that in his eyes and I knew enough about nerve pain to know there is little that can really relieve it.

But we fought it in every way we could. David had 3 months of daily radiation treatments, and spent 3 months in Mexico taking the only alternative treatment that could pass the blood-brain barrier. But the cancer continued to spread, and the pain grew exponentially. Finally after nearly a year, when adequate pain medication left David hallucinating, Dr. Wright said that it was time to consider the only possibility he could come up with to possibly save David's life. He had never seen it done, or even heard of anyone doing it, but he thought that it might be possible to stop the cancer by removing most of the spinal cord, and a good part of the peripheral nerves extending from it. It would mean that David would

be what is called flaccid paraplegic from the chest down, but Dr. Wright thought that he would be able to save all the vital body functions, and David's life. We were both in shock, but it took David only a short while to agree to a surgery with an outcome that would be at best an educated guess. Despite finding myself in the middle of a nightmare, I had no doubts, and no fear.

You see, nearly a year earlier, something had happened that had changed the game for both of us. The night before his first surgery - when we would be finding out for the first time what the prognosis was - we were getting dressed to go out to dinner. We had seen the doctor for the first time on Thursday, and this was Sunday night; we had spent previous 3 days in frantic attempts to stay busy, to keep our minds off what we feared. You can imagine how I had been praying: beseeching, begging, pleading, bargaining. Finally we had decided to go out to a nice restaurant, where we had many happy memories, to try to relax and quiet our minds. David was in the bathroom brushing his teeth, when suddenly, as I stood in the bedroom, a voice spoke to me. It wasn't a physical voice - I didn't hear it in my ears - but it was a voice in the silence that spoke to my mind, and it said: "Everything will be all right." That is all: five words. But in that moment my heart became peaceful. This is how I knew that it was real; that it hadn't come out of my imagination. It frightened me. For a moment I was afraid, and then peace poured through me like waves of golden light. I knew without any doubt that I had heard the voice of God, and that everything *would* be all right. And as the fear was swept from my heart, gratitude filled it. From that moment my prayers could become "Thy will be done" - and I expect many of you know exactly how hard it is to pray that sincerely about a loved one whose life is threatened - but I could let go completely of my *wants*: that it would all disappear like dream, that a miracle would take place in the OR, that the doctor would find he'd been wrong about it all. From that moment I knew God was with us, and working a plan through us that I could not understand, but that I had to surrender to. I could trust that somehow, in some way I couldn't yet see, everything would indeed be all right.

The next day, when David went into surgery, I was calm and trusting, and that calm and trust filled him as well. When the doctor came out 6 hours later - at 11:30 at night - to tell me that his initial diagnosis was right and nothing could be done, I wasn't fearful, I didn't cry; I could walk into David's room and tell him "you did great, and everything will be all right" even though I knew that this man, whose life was fishing, would never see his boat again.

But he was alive, and we both set out to find a way to be grateful for whatever was going to come to us now. I can remember one day, a week or so after his surgery. I was sitting in his room, and we were trying to think of positive things about our situation, to cheer ourselves up. All of a sudden he began to laugh,

and said, "I've got it!" I looked at him and he said, "I'll never have to help your sister move again!" When his nurse walked in a few minutes later we were both convulsed with laughter, and I know she thought we were in some sort of pathetic denial. But we were in no denial - we were just looking for God's plan that we knew was there somewhere.

For his part, David never looked back. With no sensation below his armpits - can you imagine what it would be like to go to sleep, and when you woke up feel as though no part of you existed below your armpits? - he taught himself to sit up in 3 days. It had been guessed that he would be in the ICU for 2 days, the neurological department for 2 weeks, and physical rehab for up to 3 months. He was in the ICU for 12 hours, neurology for 5 days, and rehab for 5 weeks. He learned to swing his body to move from his bed to a board to a wheelchair. He learned to drive with hand controls. And from his electric wheelchair, he set out to make a new life.

We sold the boat and the permits, and he launched into what he decided would be his new career. He had enjoyed woodworking as a hobby off season. We lived in the country, and he had his shop in the barn. From his wheelchair, he himself re-made everything in his shop to be wheelchair accessible. He had especially enjoyed working on a lathe, turning bowls and hollow vessels, and it was this he decided to focus on, and he let nothing stand in his way. As he honed his skills, he took to using chunks of burl wood that sometimes weighed hundreds of pounds, which he himself moved around the shop using a complex system of ropes and pulleys that he himself designed. To make another long story short, by the time he died, 7 years later of another, unrelated brain tumor, he had gone from being a talented hobbyist to being a nationally known wood turner whose pieces sold in galleries - some for thousands of dollars.

But the point of all this is that despite horrible, horrible circumstances, we both learned to be grateful for the blessings that we had. The one moment I will always remember from those years of his paralysis was this: he was talking on the phone to a friend he hadn't seen in many years, and I overheard him say, "you know, I think I'm happier now." Yes, he was to die a few years later, and yes, there were many, many times life was harder than I could ever explain, but God's plan for us *was* working as He had intended it, and we experienced blessings on blessings - far too many to recount here - for being grateful, and trusting God. David knew success and joy and satisfaction he never could have known if he had continued fishing, and both of us grew in ways we never could have imagined. It was God's *loving* plan for us, and everything was indeed all right.

Now an important thing I learned during those years of having to find ways to be grateful is so obvious as to be silly. There are many times when life is so hard, so painful, that you can't think of anything to be grateful about – not in those moments, and sometimes those “moments” last a very, very long time. And I learned that what I needed to do was to write down the blessings and miracles in my life during the times they were bountiful, so that in the hard times I would have a list that I could take out of my pocket to remind me when I needed reminding. It is such a simple thing: just start. This afternoon, write down one thing that fills your heart with gratitude. Then another. Write one or two things every day, and things to write down will begin to multiply in your mind like loaves and fishes. And as you do this more and more, you will be creating a habit in your mind, and you will start to see miracles and blessings everywhere you look, all day, every day. God will be reflecting His joy in your gratitude into everything you see.

I want to give you an example: last month I was taking an airline flight. I had my laptop and was watching a movie I had brought with me – *Pride and Prejudice* for the umpteenth time – and feeling a bit put-out because there was no wifi available so that I could be online. Suddenly I remembered a little comedy bit that someone had sent me in a email a year or so ago. *I was sitting in a chair, flying through the air. I was watching 19th century people living their lives on a little metal box on my lap. And I was worried about what I didn't have!*

What could be more miraculous than flying through the air in a chair in a metal tube? What could be more miraculous than a computer? We think of these things: “oh that is just technology”, but human technology is a miracle. And what could be a greater blessing? How can we not be grateful for all these things that have been created through our human minds from the greatest Mind of all?

My most precious memory of David is watching him in my mind, heading for his shop. It was about ¼ mile up a dirt road from our house, and every morning he would take off in his electric wheelchair (another miracle!), going full tilt boogie up the road. On rainy days, of which there were many in WA, I would put a large poncho over him and his chair that would go nearly to the ground, and off he would go: looking like a blue pup tent bouncing and careening up the road, off to find new miracles through his incredible mind, and the joy that God had wanted for him.

So I challenge you with this: when you go home today, find and recognize five miracles between the church and your front door. Write down a few blessings to carry with you as a reminder for all times. Try to live in gratitude from moment to moment until it becomes a habit and you are living in gratitude in *every*

moment. Look until you can see God's plan for you in *everything* that happens to you. Then everything truly will be all right. *Amen.*