**The Lessons of Healing**

**A sermon by Dr. Alex Brough**

Given at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, Massachusetts

On the 25th Sunday after Pentecost

November 15, 2015

Good morning, my name is Alex Brough. I am a Physician and would like to share my recent experience with a life threatening ailment and healing. It was stressful yet enlightening time that continues to affect my life as well as strengthens my faith.

My story starts about twenty years ago when I was first diagnosed with Atrial Fibrillation, an irregular heart-beat. I was evaluated and ultimately the treatment involved what we in the medical world term observation. Which is basically keeping an eye on things. For me this involved a yearly echocardiogram, an ultrasound, to check for clots which are a common complication of Atrial Fibrillation. For two decades everything was fine. And then my situation changed. One echocardiogram showed that my Aorta was dilating. The Aorta is the main artery that comes directly off the heart. A sort of Mass Turnpike of arteries, the big one. At the time I discussed this with my physician and decided it was probably nothing, but again, let’s keep an eye on it. A year later, this past March it had ballooned and become much worse. I was now in danger of having a rupture within the next year. A danger I took to heart as my Uncle had died of this very condition.

I was now looking at a choice of death or major surgery and I choose to pursue the later. In preparation for surgery I needed further imaging to define the condition for the surgeon. I went for an MRI of my Aorta and it confirmed what we found on echo. However, there was something else. There was an ill-defined mass in my chest. I hoped this would turn out to be nothing, but no it was indeed a tumor and I had to meet with a second surgeon. Ultimately the two surgeons both of whom wanted to move fast, agreed upon a date, June 4th. At least I was going to be able to celebrate my Daughter’s birthday.

During this time I had surge of negative emotions and feelings, a type of anticipatory grief. There is a concept of the 5 stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. I was able to fast forward through denial and anger, big is big no matter how one measures the Aorta. I knew that no matter what the outcome I was to be dramatically affected by this and more importantly so was my family. A component of my preparation involved planning for a negative outcome. I had pulled out all of the life insurance policies and retirement paperwork to review how financially secure my family would be if there was not a good result and I was significantly disabled. I could not help but to think that I was failing them by abandoning them. In facing this challenge I asked myself if I had done enough for my family. I feared for how they would survive. For my wife I wondered how she would fare being the sole breadwinner with three children. Who would be there to help with the homework, bring them to a sports practice, or even teach them Jedi mind tricks? I worried that I would need daily care and that I might become a burden to my family. These fears festered and kept me up a night, I prayed they would dissipate. Ultimately we had several stressful conversations about practical matters that we usually took for granted.

Hopelessness was the most challenging feeling with which we dealt. We skipped right through bargaining, as there was no magic pill or cure for these maladies. I spent a lot of time going through the medical literature on surgical outcomes, complications of both the procedures and anesthesia and long term sequelae of having a graft. Chemotherapy for this, Radiation for that and what would that do to the graft? I had so much information, almost too much information. Each answer seemed to open new avenues of thought on a matter that I had not previously considered.

Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that I had to trust my Physicians and the whole team of care. Whatever was going to happen would, I had done as much as I could to prepare for this. We had a plan in place for the family and I had reached an acceptance of my diagnosis and plan for treatment. Beyond this I had accepted a trust in God.

Rooted in my hope was a spiritual peace that I started to feel. It was not apparent that I would return with full function or with some type of disability after the operation. The peace was not contingent on a good outcome, yet I felt safe regardless. In Hebrews 11:1, the King James version, It is said that “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” I work in a world of evidence; evidence based medicine is the accepted standard for Physicians. Controlled studies help guide and mold the practice of medicine. I had concrete evidence that my Aorta could be fixed and the tumor treated but spiritually the evidence of faith gave me assurance beyond what medical knowledge could provide.

Faith was underlying my hope for recovery and mitigating the possible negative consequences that might arise. The tangible aspect of that faith was reflected in my family, friends and community. When the time came for the Oxygen mask to cover my face and the last push of IV medications sent me off to sleep I had a sense of calm. I awoke and became aware at some point later and moved my fingers and toes, I spoke with my nurse about my nausea medications and realized then that I could think. There is a bypass related complication of dementia, so I was particularly worried about that and was much relived. As a side, in preparing for this sermon I think my judgement may have been somewhat impaired otherwise I don’t know that I would have agreed with Chris’s request to speak this morning. I certainly had a fair amount of pain and nausea and a whole lot of fatigue. As I became stronger, I experienced joy, another emotion that took me back to faith. After a period of recovery in the Hospital, I returned home and had an even bigger surge of joy. My sense of peace was more tangible.

There is a fair amount of writing in the medical literature about religion and spirituality in the provision of health services. There are multiple opinions and definitions voiced, but one, Michael King, a psychologist in London writes about this and describes religion as an organized system of beliefs and practices that facilitates a closeness to God and fosters an understanding of ones relationship with one another. Spirituality he defines as the personal quest for understanding.

I felt closer to God as I realized that I had to trust those who were taking care of me. Part of religion is the relationship we have with others. Elements of that relationship were demonstrated during the difficult days with the well wishes I received and such acts as the generous delivery of food to our house. It was certainly tasty and most appreciated and I think most importantly gave my family and I a sense of being part of a larger construct. Yet the act of receiving was peculiar in way. I had never been on the receiving end of gifts to that extent and for that reason. References to the act of giving abound in scripture. I think of Acts 20:35 when Jesus states it is more blessed to give than to receive. In a way I understand, though not fully, the gift of giving more now that I have received. Being weak, tired and infirm gave me a perspective that was foreign but enlightening. Having received, I can now say with confidence that giving is truly special. I thank again everyone for their support.

It is challenging to describe the mystical and spiritual aspect of my story. As a Christian my spirituality is being in union with the Holy Spirit which is difficult to conceptualize and is rather mysterious. What did the Holy Spirit have to do with my condition or treatment? I can’t answer this question, but I can feel it. Perhaps that is the point. Despite being diagnosed with two life threating conditions, I was able to obtain a sense of peace. This came to me before the surgery was begun and has since remained with me.

Ultimately I was able to recover physically. My artificial graft is stable and functioning well. My tumor was quite rare, it even stumped the Thoracic surgery fellow; excision was curative. I have now returned to the life I had before this all began with only a few limitations. I feel fortunate that I received two gifts, physical and spiritual. The physical gift was early identification of my catastrophic health problems and having a chance at a cure. Yet this gift is limited, while I yearn to live for decades to come, my time on this earth is finite. As we learned in the reading of Mark 13:1-8 today, the disciples, who were marveling at the stonework of the temple, were counseled by Jesus that even the large stones will be thrown down and the temple ultimately will fall into decay. The allegory is for own temples, our bodies. Someday I will expire, but my spirit will remain with God in a temple that cannot fall into disrepair.

The spiritual gift is enduring. It is not contingent on any measurable outcome. For myself I wanted a positive recovery and for this I strive when I care for my patients. But the reality is that sometimes the results are negative. An artery might rupture and recovery is limited. A tumor might be inoperative or unresponsive to our current armamentarium. The peace that comes with acceptance of God and a relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit is permanent and it is this peace that I pray for us all.

Amen