



# Make It Simple

*A Resource for Stewardship Education and Annual Response*

## **Facing the Truth**

### **Sermon Outline "To Tell the Truth"**

#### **Summary and Texts**

Faced with the improbable "opportunity" of their life-threatening disease, cancer patients can face an involuntary simplicity that requires careful, principled sorting out of priorities and relationships. The sermon writer sees in this example the voice of God's invitation to any of us who experience any tribulation to face God's truth, beautiful and ugly at the same time: In Christ, God rescues us and calls us out of ourselves toward lifework that accomplishes God's purposes.

#### **Texts**

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Psalm 51:10-12

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark 4:37-41

## Sermon

Stocking caps. That's the first thing I noticed as I began working as a chaplain at a cancer center. Most of the patients were wearing stocking caps. The sight was so unusual that first day that I found myself both staring and trying not to stare.

Now, over a year later, after dozens of hours of conversations with cancer patients, I have learned to notice much more than stocking caps. Come with me now to the infusion suite in the hospital, where patients will talk to us about their leukemia and lung cancer, where chemo drips into veins and life is measured and treasured. Find out how cancer patients grow to make life simple, after cancer suddenly makes life complicated.

Many cancer patients tell the story of the day they were diagnosed. It's typically a tough and memorable day. It's a day when one must face the truth that life has changed, a day when the storm comes up on the lake.

Next come more truth stories—the stories of all the truths patients have to face after they are diagnosed: doctor visits, insurance questions, painful conversations with loved ones, update networks, and of course the times alone when one's own fears and strengths surface.

Many patients then enter a new world called Cancer Treatment. It's a world that requires copious amounts of money and time! A world that also requires massive amounts of people-power. Caregivers are enlisted to accompany patients through weeks, months, or years of treatments and chemotherapy.

I have to be honest with you—at the end of that first day of chaplaincy, and of many more days to follow—I felt like running out the door. I was thrilled not to have cancer. This same knee-jerk reaction may also occur when any of us first encounters people who are starving, people who are poor, refugees, beggars, or people dealing with disfiguring disabilities. Perhaps this is why we use the euphemism, “People less-fortunate than us” to describe or hide our emotions.

Over the months of working there, though, I began to notice something. While no one ever asks for cancer—and it would be silly to romanticize this disease—cancer treatment seemed to clarify life for many, many patients. It began to occur to me that the world outside the cancer center appeared to be much more muddled than the world inside the cancer center.

Little by little, I noticed the common thread in the patients: a goal that centered and connected them. When their life was on the line, they got clear about preserving life or finishing life with grace. Compared to most people I met outside of work, the patients seemed refreshingly “real.” As I said, cancer can be a dread disease. But facing the truth of cancer seems to force many, many people to make life simpler by figuring out what life really means. When people are thrust into this involuntary simplicity, they see more clearly what’s important. And that’s often loved ones and God

Even if God has been in the background of patients’ lives, God suddenly enters the conversation. Patients talk to me about God and often tell me about Bible verses that comfort them through months of treatment. One patient spoke earnestly to me about his guiding verse, Exodus 14:14. It’s a verse taken from the moment when the Israelites are caught between the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh’s army behind them. The words startle and encourage at the same time: *The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.*

Be still. That’s what Jesus told the storm in Mark’s Gospel. That storm arrived out of nowhere, didn’t it? And it changed the disciples’ lives in a split second. It’s hard to imagine how terrified they were, unless we’ve been there. Facing the truth that life can end or change—shivers run down our spines. Flung about, their faith mixing with their fears, the disciples woke Jesus. They knew, even in their terror, that Jesus was the source of life.

In this case, Jesus made it simple for the disciples: He saved them. Later Jesus died and rose again to save them and the rest of us as well. Who is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?

Dealing with a crisis like cancer or a job layoff or a flood instantly strips away the pretensions we hide behind. Everyone can see the truth of our need—even God—and what a relief that truth is! The truths come into focus—we need help to survive, God is with us.

Involuntary simplicity pushes truth into our face. It’s sometimes an ugly truth—the truth of loss and pain. It’s also a beautiful Truth—the truth that we never have to be alone. The waves are poised to drown us and we’re in the boat with Jesus. Where else would we rather be? We can taste the salt water—from the waves, from our tears. *The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.*

Making it simple by facing the truth is a huge issue for the church. We are the community of faith that people often turn to when involuntary simplicity strikes. And then there are so many truths on the line:

- The truth that the church is there to help others.
- The truth that we are at the mercy of some pretty hard unknowns.
- The truth that needs confessing—we are sinners and saints.
- The truth that God loves and saves us.

Our sacred stories of Jesus and the disciples allow us to see and pass on the truth. The Lord will fight for us. Even in the midst of programs, budgets, and a million distractions, especially in the midst of crises, the church needs to keep this message simple: God will fight for us—and God will fight for others through us. We in the church need to hear that simple truth as much as we need to tell it. We need Jesus—this is our greatest asset as disciples.

There comes a day when the nurses hold a party because a cancer patient no longer has to come for chemo, or when a transplant has engrafted and life goes on. Or there comes a day when eternal life begins for a patient while earthly life continues for others. When we can look back after the crisis, after the treatment, we face another truth question—Will an experience of involuntary simplicity lead to voluntary simplicity in our lives? Once the flood damage is mopped up, once the chemo bag is empty, once the new job becomes normal—are we different and will we remain so?

God hopes so. There were people on the other side of that once-stormy lake—waiting for news of how those disciples got across. There are neighbors and strangers depending on our Christ-inspired generosity.

We hope so. It is refreshing—no, revolutionary—to live life with a clearer, simpler appreciation of what life means. It is redemptive to keep our focus on Jesus, the one who saves us.

I've witnessed the immense generosity that is unleashed when patients and their families face cancer. Every day in the cancer center, I hear families educating one another about the process of treatment. They comfort one another as only an insider can; they bond so quickly because of the clear challenge they share. Their generosity feels essential for both giver and receiver. I notice people eager to ease another person's path, knowing how hard it can be. And what a thing that is for us to learn. When the things we take for granted in life seem to crumble—certainty, old systems, idols—the need and desire to give surfaces. Wow—that's a pretty durable value-giving. It endures and grounds us when we simplify our values and actions.

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When we truly feel connected to others through thick and thin, we express our joy through generosity. We are one body, the body of Christ. And in this body, a body that can be ravaged by loss, sin, and crisis; a body that can be bathed by love and simple purpose, Jesus is among us. I think it's time to call on the One who really saves us, don't you? Amen