

“Staring at a Blank Wall”

Psalm 46:1-3,7

Matthew 6:25-34

Philippians 4:4-7,11-13

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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The story is told from a number of years ago of two men who shared a room in a hospital. Both of them being long-term care patients and both of them being basically bedfast, they rarely got to see anything beyond the four walls of their room. The man by the door was often quiet and withdrawn, resentful of his condition and often, it seemed, angry toward the world.

The man by the window, on the other hand, was often bright and cheerful, friendly and warm toward both his roommate and anyone else who entered the room. And though his health was poor at best, and though he knew each day might be his last, he seemed to enjoy life and treasure each day that he was privileged to live.

Now being the kind of man that he was, he did his BEST to cheer up his roommate at every opportunity. Knowing that his roommate missed the outside world, the patient by the window, who was able to sit up and look out, asked his neighbor if it would help if he described what was going on outside. His roommate replied that it would, of course, help. So for several hours that day and each day after that, the man in the bed by the window would describe the trees...the green grass...the blue skies and white puffy clouds...the children playing in the park across the street...the kites flying on a windy day...and the family enjoying a picnic under the trees.

At first, the man in the bed by the door appreciated these word picture and looked forward to each new day when his roommate by the window would describe what was going on outside. At least for few moments each day, his roommate's description of the outside world lifted him out of the drab routine of his hospital room and allowed him to “see” the brightness of life.

Slowly, but surely, however, he began to resent the fact that HE was flat on his back by the door while his roommate by the window was getting to experience the view firsthand. After all, they were both paying the same price for the room and there was no reason why HE shouldn't have the view from the window and be able to enjoy the same stimulation. Feelings of jealousy began to gnaw away at the man until he actually became very resentful of his roommate.

One evening, however, the man by the window began struggling with his breathing as he had so many times before. As he gasped for air, he frantically fumbled to find the nurses' call button. His roommate by the door was half asleep when all this happened and was aroused from his dozing only by the sound of a thud on the floor. When he finally realized what had happened and that his roommate was lying on the floor dying, he quickly rang his own call button to summons the nurses. It was, however, too late. For though they tried valiantly to revive the man, they could not...and he died.

Well, even though the man by the door was sad to see his roommate die, he couldn't help but be a little glad as well. Oh, not that the man DIED, mind you...he'd have much rather his roommate had gotten well and simply gone home. But glad that he would be able to move to the bed by the window and see outside for himself! No more second-hand reports!

The next morning, the nurses agreed to his request and moved him to the bed by the window before another patient was brought into the room. When everyone had left, the man pushed the button on the side of his bed so that he would be up as high as possible. And with the head of the bed as upright as it would go, the man eagerly strained to see the world outside that hospital window...that wonderful view that his roommate had so beautifully described to him for so many days. What he saw, however, shocked him, for it was nothing more than another wing of the hospital only a few feet away. For days, his roommate had been staring at nothing but a blank wall.

But then, that's the way LIFE is sometimes too, isn't it? We go through life with all kinds of eager hopes and anticipations...looking forward to this or dreaming about that...anxiously awaiting a time when something exciting or special is about to happen – only to find that when this or that finally arrives and we're peering through the window of life, all we're able to see sometimes is a blank wall of disappointment and defeat ...frustration and anger...sorrow and sadness. Let me show you what I mean.

A couple looks forward for YEARS to the time when they can both retire...when, after years of hard work and scrimping and saving to raise a family, they will finally have both the time and the money to ENJOY life...to travel...to see their kids...to watch the sunsets and enjoy spending time together in the twilight years of their lives...only to find that six weeks after their retirements, the wife is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and has only a short time left to live. And suddenly, that blank wall becomes a very real reality in their lives.

Or consider, for instance, the older woman who has lived in her home for more than 50 years and whose fondest dream is to remain there in that place which is her pride and joy until her dying days...yet who is forced by faltering step and failing health to move into the nursing home which has always been her worst nightmare.

Or the young couple now growing into middle age who has tried and tried and TRIED to have children for years...and, after waiting so long, now discovers they are finally expecting...but the test show that the child they are expecting has been diagnosed with not only with Down's Syndrome, but Spina Bifada as well.

Or the young person who has hoped and planned throughout her high school years to go to college to pursue her lifelong dream of going into social work to help people, and particularly little children, make a better life for themselves...only to have those hopes dashed by a lack of finances...and grades which don't quite qualify for scholarships.

Time and time again, in these and countless other very real examples I could share with you from right within our own church family, people find themselves staring at blank walls...a blank walls which is, from time to time, an inevitable part of the landscape of ALL of our lives. The question we face, then, is what are we going to SEE when we DO find ourselves staring at those blank walls. Do we see only the hopelessness and despair of life projected there? Or are we able to see possibilities and hope? Do we see nothing but an obstacle that no amount of effort can overcome...or can we look at those blank walls and see an array of opportunities that lie ahead? In other words, do the blank walls we sometimes face represent for us the "dead ends" in life...or are we able, with God's help, to see BEYOND those blank walls to life as God intends for it to be? In reality, it is often a matter of our ATTITUDE...our attitude AND our PRIORITIES.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus is trying to tell us that our attitude in life...which is most often determined by our priorities...is the key to dealing with the blank walls we sometimes face. *"Look at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field,"* Jesus says. *"They don't worry about tomorrow... what they're going to eat or drink or wear – in other words, what's going to happen to them. Yet God takes care of THEM, doesn't He? And aren't YOU more valuable to God than the flowers of the field and the birds of the air? Of COURSE you are!"* Jesus answers. *"Therefore, God will take care of ALL who seek His kingdom and put Him first in their lives!"*

Now, let's be honest about it! That DOESN'T mean that God give us anything or everything we want in life. We may WANT a million dollars...or a new house...or a new car...or to be beautiful enough to win the Miss Universe pageant...or to live, in excellent health, to the ripe of age of 142! But just because we WANT it, that DOESN'T mean we're going to get it. That's NOT what God promises.

Instead, God assures us we will have everything we NEED...IF, that is, we are living our lives in such a way as to keep God and God's will as first priority in our lives. Or, in putting it another way in answer to a question about which commandment is the greatest, Jesus said: *"Love the Lord your God with everything you've got...and love your neighbor as yourself."* The two go hand in hand in keeping our attitudes and priorities in life straightened out – ESPECIALLY when we're staring at a blank wall.

A Christian writer by the name of David Redding, in trying to give a practical example about all of this, tells about his own Aunt Emily, who had a way of ordering the priorities of her life so that God and other were always first. And as a result, Redding writes, it gave her a wonderfully positive ATTITUDE when it came to the blank walls in life.

Whatever would happen in her life, good or bad, Aunt Em was able to see it as a personal favor about which she would always say: *“You know, this is going to do me a WORLD of good!”* She may have been too much of a “goodie two shoes” for some of us, Redding said, but she knew what it meant to have a loving and trusting attitude toward life AND toward God.

When her house was full of visiting family and all the beds were taken, including her own, Aunt Em would make herself a sleeping pallet on the kitchen floor, shushing everyone’s protest by saying, *“You know, it’ll do me a WORLD of good! My squishy old mattress makes my back hurt anyway!”*

While everyone else was groaning and complaining about the lousy food served to them at a roadside restaurant, Aunt Em would chew and chew and chew her tough old pork chop and say, *“You know, this is going to do me a WORLD of good! My jaw line was getting a little flabby lately!”*

When her husband of many years died, Aunt Em mourned his passing and shed her share of tears. But then, with a smile through her tears, she said, *“You know, this is going to do me a world of good! Fred always did tell me I needed to be more independent!”*

A number of years later, when Aunt Em herself was diagnosed with cancer and was forced to slow down her whirlwind pace of comings and goings, meeting and activities, she said: *“You know, this is going to do me a WORLD of good. I needed to cut back on my schedule anyway and this will give me a good reason to do so!”*

Redding then writes that when his Aunt Emily eventually succumbed to the cancer, *“They didn’t tell me what her dying words were. But, you know, it really wasn’t necessary. Because I can pretty much guarantee you that the last words to cross her lips would be the same words I heard her say so many times before. I can just SEE her wrinkled, old, gray head nodding as she slipped into eternal peace. ‘You know,’ she would be saying, ‘this is going to do me a WORLD of good!’”*

ATTITUDE, good friends! ATTITUDE! Aunt Em had her life straightened around right. She had, as Jesus suggested, put first things first, and, as result, found all her REAL needs in life were met so that when she was left staring at that FINAL blank wall in life, she could see BEYOND and AROUND it to the glorious Kingdom God had prepared for her. Oh, it wasn’t that she hadn’t encountered sickness and trouble and sorrow in life. She HAD...just like everybody else does from time to time. But she met it all with a life committed to loving God and loving others. And because she had her PRIORITIES straight, she also had a attitude which enabled her to deal with WHATEVER life brought her way – even the blank walls of life.

The Apostle Paul, of course, was ANOTHER who, because of his ATTITUDE, was able to face the blank walls of life with confidence and hope. For three years, Paul had been in prison...first in Caesarea and now in Rome. The church in Philippi, which Paul had founded, heard about his situation and took up an offering to send to him to help provide for his needs while he was jailed. In reply, Paul wrote a letter which we know today as *Philippians*, which many believe is one of Paul’s most beautiful letters...primarily because it reveals to us the many sides of the man – his character...his courage...his humility...AND his faith and trust in the midst of WHATEVER he faced.

In prison for three years...having been shipwrecked and beaten...stoned and whipped...having known hunger and thirst...rejection and persecution...Paul could STILL write to the Philippians:

Rejoice in the Lord always! And again, I say REJOICE!

Let all people know of your faith and determination...for the Lord is at hand!

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication,

with thanksgiving in your hearts, let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which passes ALL UNDERSTANDING,

will keep your minds and your hearts in Christ Jesus, our Lord, ALWAYS!

“For I have learned,” Paul went on to say, “to be content in WHATEVER condition I find myself in. I know what it is to be in need...and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, no matter what I’m going through, I am content – whether I’m full or hungry...whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me.”

I have the strength to deal with ANY situation through Christ who strengthens me!

I first met Jo and Hattie when I was a second year student in Seminary. Jo was a classmate of mine...and Hattie was her German Shepherd “seeing eye” dog. Jo, you see, had been blind since birth, but was entering Seminary to become a minister because she wanted to share with others how GOOD God had been to her and how much his presence and love had meant in her life. She was a remarkable young woman...full of spunk and zest for life and smart as a whip as well. And yet, she had been warned by her minister, her denomination, her parents and the Seminary itself that Seminary might be too much for her. College had been one thing...and she had done well enough there. But once she reached Seminary...well, that was GRADUATE school and the intensity of the reading and writing and note-taking and class work and seminars and professors would be so much more than anything she had previously encountered.

And yet, Jo would NOT be deterred. No matter WHAT someone would say to try and discourage her, Jo would always reply: *“I can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me.”* And she meant it! She’d tell people that God wouldn’t have brought her this far and given her the calling to go to Seminary and become a minister in the first place if God didn’t ALSO intend to give her the strength and the ability to DEAL with whatever would come her way. *“I’ve stared at blank walls all my life,”* she would say, *“but with God’s help, I’ve managed to see my way around ALL of them. I don’t see why this one will be any different!”*

And sure enough, it wasn’t! Jo DID manage her way through Seminary...not just MANAGE, mind you...but succeeding with flying colors! And the last I heard, she was the Associate Pastor of a large university church where she spent the majority of her time counseling physically impaired young people...convincing them that through their faith in Christ Jesus, the blank walls we sometimes encounter in life are not BARRIERS to faith in God, but CHALLENGES which help us reach even GREATER faith as God helps us see BEYOND those blank walls to greater possibilities than we ever dreamed possible. It’s a matter of ATTITUDE. It’s a matter of keeping things in a PROPER PERSPECTIVE. It’s a matter of PRIORITIES. *“I can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

To be sure, there ARE times in our lives when we find ourselves staring at the blank walls of life – walls of hopelessness...walls of loneliness...walls of broken relationships...walls of fear...or danger...or failure...or sickness...or even death. Perhaps some of us are staring at those walls even now. And that is very, VERY difficult to deal with. I REALIZE that! I’ve been there myself. I KNOW how hard it is! So did the Apostle Paul. So did my friend Jo. So did David Redding’s Aunt Em.

But here’s the thing. Though we ARE staring at those blank walls...and though that IS a very difficult and challenging issue to deal with, we’ve got a choice. Those blank walls can be walls which seal us in...which imprison us in a world of doubt and defeat and despair, if we let them. And AS such, those blank walls can become for us the walls of our tomb, where our faith in life and in God’s goodness and mercy and presence in our lives quickly dies. OR...those blank walls can become for us challenges to an even GREATER faith...knowing that even as we stare at what seems like hopelessness and defeat, death and despair, there is ALWAYS hope if we put our trust and faith in God and in God’s Son, Christ Jesus, our Lord.

For I have learned, the Apostle Paul wrote, “in what EVER state I find myself... with what EVER blank wall which stands before me...I have learned to be content. For I can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me! I can handle what EVER life brings my way with the help and presence and power of Jesus Christ who is with me always!”

It’s a matter of ATTITUDE!

It’s a matter of TRUST!

It’s a matter of putting FIRST THINGS FIRST and having faith in Him who IS with us always, even to the close of the age.

In HIS holy name, Amen...and Amen!

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