
Sermon by Sarah Cordle

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January of this year I thought I was starting off on the right foot. I had gotten great grades the previous semester, had a fun volleyball season, hung out with my friends a lot, and gone to Friday Morning Fellowship. I viewed second semester of my senior year as the time to relax and take a break from the usual hectic pace of my life, but as it turns out this wasn't the plan for me. For the past few months I'd been noticing a small lump that was forming underneath my ear. My mother and I did the safe thing and went to see my doctor about it. My doctor ran some blood tests which came back normal and diagnosed it as an enlarged lymph node, something that should go away or get smaller with time, which lowered my fear but made me still worry about it slightly. A few weeks later the lump was still there, so I went to a different doctor who diagnosed it as an enlarged lymph node and said that it was nothing to worry about even if it was there for a while. Despite the doctor's words, I had a nagging feeling that told me something was wrong and that this lump wasn't normal. Not having a diagnosis made me scared because I knew the lump wasn't normal and yet the doctors kept telling me it was all in my head and that nothing was wrong. It was especially hard because I couldn't explain things to my friends because they'd think I was distrustful of the doctor and my family thought it was nothing to worry about, but I tried to push my worry away and focus on my senior year. By January the lump had gotten larger and was causing horrible stabbing pains in my ear and neck, so I went to a new doctor who didn't dismiss my worry and checked it out immediately. After performing an ultrasound on the lump, he told me there was no way this was a lymph node and that he needed to perform some tests. During the next 3 weeks I underwent 2 painful biopsies, which gave inconclusive answers, and an MRI which suggested that I could have lymphoma, so my doctor decided the necessary action was to remove the mass before it got any bigger. As soon as the words "cancer" and "surgery" left my doctor's mouth, I got really scared over not knowing if I had cancer or not and what would happen in the surgery. As the day of the surgery approached, my family prayed a lot and came together to help prepare us for whatever lay ahead. The morning of surgery I put on my state championship lacrosse t-shirt and favorite pair of sweatpants, and in the pre-operation room I asked a nurse to help distract me as I got an IV and had medicine and fear pumping through me. Before I went back, my grandmother, mother and sister gave me hugs and told me they loved me, and as I fell asleep from the anesthesia I thought about them and all the things I still wanted and needed to do after my surgery.

Waking up from surgery I knew that something was wrong. My doctor was sitting in front of me saying "lift your eyebrows! Blink your eyes! Smile!" and kept a perplexed look on his face the entire time. When my mother finally came into the room, the doctor told me the news. I'd had a tumor in my neck that was three times the size it was on the MRI and luckily it was cancer-free and we'd gotten it out before it'd grown any larger. The good news was that the tumor was cancer-free, which made me ecstatic, but the bad news was that my facial nerve had been hit during surgery and as a result the right side of my face was partially paralyzed for hopefully only the next 6 months.

While I was recovering from my surgery and this unforeseen blow, I tried to stay optimistic. I cracked jokes about how now I could do the one-eyebrow trick I'd always wanted to do and how it just looked like I'd gotten Botox so no worries, but inside I was starting to wither. After a two days full of sleeping, avoiding mirrors, and praying for any movement in my face my mother suggested that I go to a healing service that the Church had Friday afternoons. I'd never heard of this before and expected the service to be full of people with runny noses and small coughs so I felt like I didn't need to go. I was also scared of people seeing me and staring at my face and didn't expect to feel anything different about myself or my face after going, but in the end my mother dragged me to the car and brought me to the service.

The word salvation comes from the Latin word "salvus" which means to rescue and to heal. To say that the salvation and healing I received through the healing service changed my perspective is an understatement. Only about 12 people attended the service which sharply contrasted with the 400 or so I was used to seeing on Sunday mornings. During this small service, we heard readings from the Bible about healing and recited passages, but the biggest moment for me was when the priest laid his hands on those in need of healing. I stood in a short line, self-consciously trying to turn my face so others wouldn't see it, when I overheard the whispered pleas for help from others. One man was dealing with prostate cancer. A woman's best friend was having surgery that day because of breast cancer. Another man's wife had been in a car accident and was in critical condition. I was shocked by the afflictions people suffered from, and by the time my turn came I felt ashamed for being so self-conscious of my face. By taking a step back from focusing on my own suffering, I realized that everyone in the room was suffering with their own afflictions, and was amazed by how strong and unaffected they all appeared to me. After describing my reason for healing, the priest put his hands on my head and asked God to watch over me and bless me. During the peace of the service everyone went up to everyone and gave each other a hug or word of encouragement, and by the time I got back to my seat I was in tears.

That day I learned how the presence of God can be felt in community. I'd selfishly been thinking that no one else understood what I was going through and felt very alone, but going to that healing service strengthened me and brought me out of my sadness into a new optimistic outlook on life. I didn't care if people stared at me or didn't understand why I wore sunglasses outside all the time or couldn't finish an assignment in class; all I cared about now was taking care of myself through the help of my family and close friends and figuring out my next steps in life. The word "community" was given a whole new meaning for me who'd previously thought of it as just a group of people in the same place. Now I thought of community as people committed to sharing their lives with each other. The pain and suffering shared by the community inside that healing service granted me a different view of God as well. Before I'd felt like God had dealt me a bad hand and had left me to pick up the pieces; after this service, I felt like God had never left me and had helped lead me to a healing place where both my spirit and my emotions were uplifted. I realized that while I had to face such a challenge, God was there as a solid base for me to lean and rely on during such a trying time in my life.

The gospel today talks about how Jesus is the true vine and God is the vinegrower who prunes away all of the unnecessary branches that won't help the vine bear fruit. Looking back on my experience, I've come to view my challenges from my surgery as a blessing because of the change it enacted on my life. Before my surgery, a bad grade on a test seemed like the end of the world to me so I was always very stressed about getting good grades. After my surgery, I adopted an attitude of thinking of things in terms of how long I'd remember them, so if I started to stress about a math test, I'd think about if I'd remember that math test six months from now and would realize how insignificant that stress was on my entire life. Fights my friends and I or my sisters and I had with each other over stupid things like not going to a party or wearing someone else's shirt became stupid in my mind because there are so many positives and more serious things to fight about than a simple shirt. As a result of my surgery, I've come to realize how some things are more important in life. The relationship I have with my family has become extremely important. Every step of the way, they've always been there giving me support and encouragement when my spirits drooped, and without this experience I never would have realized just how lucky I am to have such an amazing family. The sufferings of others have become more apparent to me and in my everyday life I am more aware of how I can help others. If I see that someone's feeling down or is having problems, I really try to make them smile or feel better because I remember how much better it made me feel when people actually cared about me for 5 seconds. God tells us to get rid of the baggage and the unhealthy growth so that we have room for healthy growth, and He helped me change my whole perspective on life and grow as a person.

My face is making huge strides of returning to normal function and every day I work hard with facial exercises to continue that. I'm still praying for continuing healing although I've healed so much since my surgery in late January; however, I've also realized that even if my face doesn't return to normal or full functioning that I'll be okay because it's just an appearance issue and not such a big thing. I've become closer to my family than ever before and have realized the huge value of my family's connection. I don't focus on the little stresses in life and have a much more positive outlook than before. I still have the occasional fights with my sister over things, but they're a lot less frequent because our relationship has improved so much. Many people believe that if we are healed, it is always for the purpose of allowing us to help heal others. I definitely believe that God healed me so that I could shift my focus away from unhealthy or insignificant things and direct towards the more fruitful or significant things in my life. Looking back on the person I was before my surgery compared to the person after my surgery, I've realized that those two people can never be the exact same again because of the healing and

the changing perspective caused by this event. I feel like I'm a much happier and knowledgeable person now who can pry away the unhealthy growths or stresses in my life to focus only on the necessary and healthy events in my life. Although some events seem impossible to deal with or too hard to get past, I've learned how to find the blessing and goodness of a seemingly bad event and use that to help me bear fruit in my life and continue forward towards the future and whatever it may bring, which I will do with God's help.