

**Sermon by Pastor Naomi (modified from sermon preached at Barren's on August 28th
and sermon preached at St. John's on September 18th)**

24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? - Matthew 16:24-26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

My sisters and brothers, it has been no secret that in the past few weeks, I have not been doing very well. As you know, I have Multiple Sclerosis. Given the stress, anxiety, and sadness of the upcoming transitions in the parish, I have been suffering from what medical professionals call a MS relapse. However, I realize this may be difficult to understand because I look reasonably "normal."

First let me explain a bit about Multiple Sclerosis is a disease that affects the central nervous system - the nerves in the brain and the spine. The synapses, or nerves, spontaneously and without explanation develop scars which lead to the nerves misfiring or not, in some cases not connecting at all, which is what leads to physical symptoms.

My symptoms on a "normal" day consist of significant memory problems, which mean that names and numbers are really difficult for me to retain. I also have problems with directions, as in getting from point A to point B, even if they're simple. I struggle with issues with my balance and fatigue on almost a daily basis and I actually have a lot of pain in my joints pretty regularly. These are symptoms that I have learned to deal with and compensate for, so you very rarely hear me mention that anything is wrong...because even though it is wrong, it's kind of normal, which is strange.

So now I am having a relapse - as in, I am struggling with all of the usual symptoms plus in the past three weeks I have struggled with horrible fatigue and my legs feel unsteady beneath me, so balance is even more difficult. At times in the past three weeks my face, arms, legs, and torso have been all numb as if some one has used topical Novocain all over my body; my hands have had a strange sensation like they have gone to sleep; and when I turn my head down or quickly to one side or the other, a really strange vibration or pulse travels down my spine, through my legs, all the way to my feet. All of this means that I have been very uncomfortable, somewhat in constant pain, and I'm exhausted.

I tell you all of this not to illicit pity, although your prayers have been and will always be appreciated, but because we are a family and families share stuff with one another... and also because as I have been thinking about my physical health, I have been thinking a lot about the parish, and I have found some comparisons.

I think the parish is sick...and has been for quite some time. And like many illnesses, we just didn't realize it until it hit us, hard. And by this, I mean, all of a sudden we realized that we were going to need to make some financial changes and make some cuts. Which means that as a parish, we can no longer faithfully support two pastors. No matter how the numbers are rearranged, the parish just cannot keep two pastors on staff.

And so in this way, I think the parish has been struck with an illness. Unfortunately, it's not an unfamiliar illness, as there are many congregations making some similarly tough decisions. However, if you or a loved one has ever been significantly ill, it's very personal, no matter how many people you know have had the same illness or disease.

So, here we are, the parish is sick...and I'm sick.

And in my present condition I find myself going through many phases of grief. I'm utterly frustrated and quite angry. I am sad and at times I feel devastated and utterly defeated. And then within the same hour I try to ignore it all and live happily in denial. I try to laugh at the horrible way my body feels, and sometimes I can, but sometimes I can't and I end up in tears.

As a parish, I think we are working through some similar means of coping with our grief, both as a whole and as individuals in facing this upcoming transition. I know that some of you have expressed your sadness and feelings of hopelessness, some of you have expressed how devastated you feel and wonder if you can continue on with the parish. Some of us have been living in denial and cracking jokes to try to ease tension. Some of us have tried to accept what is happening and are ready to move on.

I realize that there are some in the parish who are still grieving the way the poll vote to unify with Fileys turned out...Unfortunately, this financial mess would have affected us no matter how that poll vote went, but it doesn't stop some of you from feeling like this is a one-two punch sort of an illness - a kick you when you're down kind of thing. I also realize that there are some in the parish who are still grieving the formation of the parish.

And so what do we do?

Well, we need to acknowledge our grief.

We need to acknowledge it to ourselves and to one another because all of the emotions we are feeling...all of the ways we are experiencing our grief, it's ok. To grieve the loss of something means that it was special to you, it meant something. Grieving is tough and it hurts, but it hurts because we care so much.

We need to acknowledge our grief, but we also need to acknowledge that as the parish is going through this major change together, we are all feeling and are going to feel different about it...all of our individual griefs are going to be different, sometimes even within the same family. So we need to listen to one another. Do not deny or minimize the grief of a fellow brother or sister, even if you don't feel the same way about the same event.

And as we acknowledge our grief and listen to one another, we need to most importantly pray for one another during this time of change and grief.

Grief is a tricky thing, because after a given period of time, you begin to think you should feel better, or you do feel better, but then unexpectedly, it will hit you again, seemingly out of the blue. That's ok too...that's part of the process.

I ask that you please, please be honest with one another as your congregation and the parish as a whole goes through this transition and I also ask that you please, please be gentle with one another as you open up and share.

Jesus said: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." What does that mean in light of the parish? What does that mean to you?

For us, at this point in time, I think Jesus is very clearly saying, if you fight to keep things the way they were for your own comfort and sense of "church," then you are fighting to save simply your life, and will in essence lose it, or eventually die. However, if you reexamine what it means to be "church" in light of constant changes in society and worshipping population; if you reexamine what it means to be church to the community

around you; if you make sacrifices and changes and in essence lose your old sense of what it means to be church; then you will find true life in Christ.

I think Jesus is saying to us is that we need to change to meet the needs of the world and fulfill the work of Christ in the world and fully live...or don't change, and die.

This is a lot easier said than done...but ultimately it's your choice. No one can make it for you.

Recently, the parish has had to make some tough choices about how to face the immediate future. On August 28th, you took a vote that in essence stated you would continue to maintain parish-family ties, despite the current financial situation that all three congregations are facing. However this vote was most clearly a decision about the continued future parish involvement of your sisters and brothers at St. John's Franklin.

This is a vote that will alter the future of the parish, which is bringing change and some grief...but it was a vote that was initially passed unanimously by all of the parish councils earlier in the summer and then a few weeks ago, passed unanimously at Emmanuel and St. John's and by almost 90% at Barren's.

I see amazing hope in the fact that the congregations of Emmanuel and Barren's voted that the members of St. John's should and will continue to be a part of the parish family. This is what families do, they stick together. In the good times, they celebrate with one another and in the bad times, they support and care for one another. There is much hope for the family of the parish as you continue through this transition together.

So as a parish family, you have some tough decisions to make about your future. The recent vote, though keeping the family together, doesn't solve the problems the parish is facing, it doesn't cure the illness...And so after the grief of this recent transition has started to pass (but remember, it will crop up again), you, the parish, will need to decide what to do. This is not a decision that will be handed to you by the synod, this is not a decision that can be made for you by a pastor. These are your congregations, your parish, and you need to decide what to do.

The future, as a parish, is a complete unknown...and that is really, really scary.

It is scary to be in transition.

It is scary to go through change.

It is scary to be ill.

If you or some one you love has ever suffered from an illness, you know what it means to utilize all that modern medicine has to offer to help make that person better or extend their quality of life. Many times taking medicine and taking time to heal, is hard frustrating work. Sometimes the healing process includes doing therapy of some sort, which is also tough...but for those of you who have been there, you know it's a necessary part of getting well.

It is going to take some hard work for the parish to get well, to get over this illness. But I have hope that this is the illness that will wake the parish up to do the work to get better.

Part of this work includes being open to any idea that will help to minimize over all operating expenses so that money can go towards ministries. Another part of this work is to get involved in the ministries of the parish. Be present at the activities of the parish and your congregation, not just on Sunday mornings. Join your brothers and sisters and support them in the ministries they are passionate about.

The other part of this work is to examine personal giving. I know some of you give faithfully, however, I ask everyone to examine what you give to support your congregation and the parish.

And, most importantly, pray...pray for the communities of the other congregations in the parish and pray for your parish family as a whole. Pray without ceasing.

Of course the other option when one gets ill, is to consciously or unconsciously give up. It happens, people who are seriously ill, sometimes just give up, because its too difficult to fight anymore, because they are in so much pain. This is a valid choice for certain people who are ill...and this is a valid choice for the parish.

However, please make a choice about the future of the parish, don't do nothing and have the choices made for you. My hope and prayer is that this is a choice that the community of the parish can make together, rather than fall a part completely.

In times of trouble, in times of great illness, I have discovered that it is better to lean on family and friends, to ask for help, and receive help when it is offered.

Please, my friends, as tough as this transition is for all of us, please, lean on one another, listen to another, and help one another.

As one who will miss you and who loves you dearly, please don't let this illness break you. Please let this be the thing that makes you stronger and more cohesive as a family...and please as you listen and support one another know that Christ is with you as you grieve and make tough decisions about the future.

Amen.