

# Core Balance

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,  
at the eleven o'clock service, July 1, 2012.  
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 and Mark 5:21-43.*

It has been a big week at St. Bart's, big in the sense that all of us on the staff received a very up close and personal wake up call. On Wednesday morning one of our colleagues suffered a fatal heart attack. No warning, no sign of trouble, the day began as an ordinary one for him and his family; and then before most people had even gotten to work, Rex Villa, our lead engineer, had died here in his office.

At this moment his family is still somewhat protected by the psychic numbing that surrounds them. That numbing at a time like this I believe to be grace, a gift of God. It somehow allows them to move through the motions of these first few days of their radically new life without simply dying from their own grief and shock. Those of us who worked with Rex, having a bit more distance than the family, being a little less numb, almost immediately began to speak of the life lessons his death caused us to recall. As people do, we often relied on the hackneyed little phrases we have heard so many times that we can finish them before the person spouting them does. And that was okay; we said them anyway. We said them to one another because we needed to say them and hear them because they are true. Their being well-worn does not change the fact of their truth.

"Man, you never know, do you?"

"Life is short."

"Here one second and gone the next."

"It makes me want to go call my family right now, just to tell them how much I love them."

"We need to live life with gusto because in the blink of an eye, we could be gone."

And then, of course, the ones that leave us pondering for a long time:

"What does it all mean?"

Are we taking the time we should to smell the roses?"

Obviously an event like this affects the writing of a sermon. I have gone many, many directions this week in my own thinking and writing, specifically trying to avoid the worst of the religious clichés of this genre. You know the ones I am talking about: the ones that make an effort—an honest and often loving effort—to give an answer—any answer. But particularly the one that attributes all sorts of plans and actions to God. They all make me so crazy that I am not going to even give them airtime in my sermon. When something like this occurs in my life what I want to believe is that God loves me and is with me, not that God's plan is a mystery that I must simply accept. I want God to hold me while I wail and maybe even wail with me. And I certainly don't want to be asked to accept some divine purpose for the death of a 58-year-old dad with three teenagers.

I came, then, to these lessons today through the lens of this experience. Though the gospel is a beloved account of two miracles attributed to Jesus, they, like all of the miracle stories, have to be unpacked carefully and tenderly lest they be more problematic than helpful. Doing that today had no appeal to me. It was, frankly to my surprise, the passage from 2 Corinthians that moved me. Very few sermons are preached on this lesson and hardly any at this time of year. We don't preach on it now because it recounts Paul's efforts to raise money from the young church in Corinth; and as everyone knows, this is not the time of year to be preaching about money. Some people are away, and many of us who aren't are wishing that we were. The last thing anyone wants to hear is some priest going on and on about money. So breathe easily; I am not about to launch into some big stewardship sermon, trying to squeeze some midsummer money out of your pocket to support the church. Although should you be so

moved, I could live with it—the Lord works in wondrous ways—and will not discourage that inclination on your part. But it is not my point today.

Just at the end of this part of his letter, Paul rephrased an age-old axiom that we first read in the book of Exodus: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." It is so simple and yet so profound; listen once again: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

In the midst of this very poignant week what struck me most in these words is their recognition of a deep longing in each of us for balance. We know when we are out of balance; we may not know precisely and immediately what to do to get back in balance. But we know. We know when enough is enough, and when too much is too much, when too little is too little. We know when we are giving too much of our lives to something that matters very little and when we are withholding too much from that which in our lives means more than anything else.

And, yes of course, these words also have to do with the sharing of our resources and abundance with others. When many have too little, those of us with too much will not have real peace. The lack of peace may simply be our fear that we will lose what we have or that those with too little will rise up and take from us what they need. More likely than that though, our lack of peace will come from an amorphous but persistent feeling that things are not quite right in the world. Although we react as though we are unaffected day after day when we see the ravages of war and famine around the world brought to us in living color on our various screens and gadgets, in fact we are not inured to them. They eat at us, and thank God they do. Let us pray never to be truly comfortable with the ways of the world, no matter how much we may particularly benefit from them.

This ancient scripture makes a point that is beyond politics. It speaks to an economy of life that is either holy and life-giving and generative or one that is characterized by grabbing and hoarding. The first affords a life of joy and abundance; the second affords a life of immense affluence but very little joy. The first results in unending gratitude, while the second results in deep penetrating fear. In truth, of course, the categories are not that neat; most of us live our lives in both economies. Sometimes we get it, and sometimes we are clueless. But with all my heart, I believe that we can only be spiritually at home when we are in balance, when we know what is important and what isn't, when we know what it takes to be truly satiated, when we know that enough is enough, and when we care that too little is way too little.

This week we will celebrate the Fourth of July holiday, a time when as Americans we get to strut our stuff. Even those of us most likely to be uncomfortable with jingoism will raise a glass or a burger or something to our nation, most of us being thankful that we live here. But as I approach this year, this verse lingers in my heart and mind. Regardless of our politics, people of faith have to be concerned about the growing gap between the top and the bottom. Our age-old tradition teaches us that real balance in our own lives, let alone in our society, only really occurs when we are mindful of this gap and what it means.

So this week, particularly for me, a little mindfulness—or actually a lot of mindfulness—seems to be the order of the day. My prayer for all of us is that we will love and love deeply—for there are no promises about life—and that we will seek real balance, the spiritual kind that puts us as right with God and one another as we can be. May it be so.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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