22nd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

August 31, 2025

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Good morning, everyone! These texts today just scream for us to address the continuing and increasing moral failure of the leaders of this nation. But that is beyond my purview this morning. It's so beyond my scope of capacity right now. This is your 5th Sunday Healing Sunday, and we're talking about healing, not metaphorically, actual healing, recovering from physical, mental, emotional and spiritual injury and illness. Very, very few of us are as well as we could be. We're all in need of healing of one form or another. I'm in need of all sorts.

As many of you know, I fell ill a few years ago. Here's a little synopsis of my sickness unto healing journey. We came to St. Francis and the Blue Hill peninsula in 2020, just weeks before the pandemic began. Two years into my incumbency, three quarters of which had been on Zoom, I got sick. A virus got into the nerves in my head which caused a persistent migraine that lasted 3 ½ years straight. You know how shingles gets into nerves… sort of like that but migraines, not rashes. The best guess is COVID, but the very fancy doctors I have seen at Mass General and the Mayo Clinic are hesitant to blame everything on that dang virus. Medications haven't helped, besides Botox which has helped a bit and I look good, no? but we did find a type of surgery that cleans up the nerves, reducing the amount of irritation caused by the virus, therefore reducing the amount of irritating information being sent into my brain. The

third of this surgeries was back in April and since then I've even had a few days with no symptoms at all!

It's been a journey. And a confusing one, because I have been pretty confused the past few years because my brain has been very, very busy processing sensations. (Good thing it wasn't overwhelming thoughts or feelings I was battling as behavior health issues are A LOT harder too get covered by disability insurance than neurological issues. But it can be a fine, fine line between the psychiatric and neurologic, and pain falls to the neurologic). Pain. Chronic pain. Not like a sun burn or hammer-meets-thumb or your back when you bend over to tie your shoes, but rather a constant thrum, a steady stream of sensation, input, think headphones too loud, headlights shining in your eyes, smell too strong, and jostling about. Overwhelms the system. You all know about chronic pain? I've had the opportunity to learn a lot about it.

You experience a sensation. If you judge that sensation to be negative, painful, it is pain. Pain is just a sensation with a specific negative judgement attached and all the following seas that come with experiencing and avoiding it. It doesn't matter if there is current injury or disease, pain is all in your head, truly, and an experience of pain is pain. Full Stop. And it is in that realm of judgement, in our reaction to what we judge to be pain and how we react or respond that suffering arises. Pain is unavoidable, but we can do a lot, a surprising lot to mitigate our suffering, not avoid, ignore or work around pain necessarily, but live with it and at least not suffer as much.

Muscling through pain and suffering can get you through a lot. I spent two years straight with my head down enduring, pushing through discomfort and disabling conditions as if they didn't exist. But they did. Pushing through the pain was largely just me denying the reality that I was immersed in. Trying to avoid what was

happening often brought brief relief, but when symptoms resurfaced, they often seemed worse than before. It can become a vicious cycle. What I really needed to do was to mindfully face everything that was going on. Think thrashing in the rapids v. being stranded on the edge watching the rapids churn. You still might be stuck on the beach, but you have a lot more clarity and can make a lot better decisions from there then when you are just trying to keep your head above water and not be dashed on the rocks. Pain is a remarkable teacher if you let it.

I have learned some other things, too. Nothing matters if you can't sleep well. Responding to the world is better than reacting to it: just a little pause and reflection before making a decision can make all the difference. When you face lost or decreasing abilities, setting intentions is more useful than setting goals: intentions are much more forgiving than goals, and when you are sick, you feel like you need to be forgiven. Well, I have. Not sure why yet. How we breathe can profoundly affect how we perceive and experience the world.

I'v learned that sickness isn't a moral failing. One unfortunately enduring impact of my service in the Marine Corps has been the idea of malingering, faking illness to get out of things. One of the worst things you could be known as was a malingerer, and with an ailment with no clinical presentation, I haven't trusted that I have been as sick as I feel. My "you should"/"if only"/"why don't you" voices were often deafening as my self worth, so tied to ability and agency, plummeted.

And most, most, most importantly, we do not exist alone, and we can't heal alone. I am standing in this pulpit today because my wife pulled me kicking and screaming towards wellness (her kicking, my screaming). My gratitude for that woman's steel is boundless, as is my gratitude for my daughters, from whom so much has been asked.

We've got some dents and dings, as Windy likes to say, but the frame isn't bent. I have learned some very practical things in the course of my illness.

But let's turn to more religious matters. We get a lot of good direction in how to be in the world through the Church. Where is God in all of this? God in Christ in whom we live and move and have our beings? I've found I know a lot less about that then the former. And that pains me.

I've had a blessedly trauma free life. I haven't had to face much in the way of trials and tribulations up until now. There is something to this privilege thing… though not having much experience dealing with difficulties did me no favors when it came to resilience. So I haven't really know what to expect from my faith in times of real trouble. It's never been tested *in extremis*. Up to now it has guided me quite well in discerning how to be in the world, how to forgive and be patient, how to be present to others, to be morally upright and use resources more justly and to use language and ideas more mindfully. It has steered my priorities, has soothed my agitation (at times), and has helped me see and lead others vastly more responsibly than I could have done on my own. It has helped me be a better person that if I were left to my own devices.

But as I fell ill, the <u>way</u> I have been sick, my faith-life hasn't helped as much as I would have guessed, certainly hoped or assumed. My overloaded nervous system, a brain that doesn't work in the same way as it used to (I used to think about things all the time, a running internal dialogue – not any more), and having to withdraw from the Church, from attending and therefore participating in liturgy because sitting in a pew in a room full of people and noise has been torturous, the path I have forged to God in Christ 'til now hasn't proved fully up to the task.

It has helped in some very important ways. Like I know for a fact that there is no Divine intention behind our Human suffering. We do that just fine on our own. But my faith helped to to never feel singled out, no "Why me?" Because, Why not me?

My practice of religion, of contemplative prayer specifically, has been very helpful at times. Mindfulness practices like the centering prayer I have done for years is a great gift, an abiding reminder that Jesus always is and always will be there. That knowledge, revealed in the practice of prayer, and the skills I have around mindfulness have helped me regulate a very disregulated nervous system. I am grateful for that practice.

But all the thinking, the theology, the systematic vision that ordered my life… Not too helpful to me with a persistent case of brain fog. Common Prayer, our disciplined forms of liturgical, a deeply felt source of solace and strength for my entire Anglican journey… not available to me as I couldn't participate. Even the blessed *ecclesia*, the gathering of Christs people as God's body in the world… human contact, forming relationships has been exceptional hard the way I have been sick. And my own identity as a priest… I have found that my faith is all tied in with my ordained ministry which is problematic as I can't practice my ministry in way remotely like I used to.

What I want to offer you all this morning isn't a cynical exposè of the shortcomings of liberal Christianity, not at all. If more of the world listened to what's were saying it would be a better world than the one unfolding right now. Certainly a kinder one. This is a cautionary tale about how you understand and experience, how you lean into and rely on God, in Christ with the Holy Spirit. What I learned before many pulpits and altars of our Church and in classrooms all the way down in Cambridge <u>could</u> be a path out of many of our world's troubles and not a few of our personal ones, too, but that certainly isn't the only way, reason and rationality, learnedness and political consciousness. For myself, this isn't proving to be sufficient in the face of the kind of

debilitating illness and resulting suffering I have faced these past few years. It's a painful revelation to me, and I'm a bit of a loss.

I urge you to plumb the depth of the Christian universe, it is vast, push especially beyond what you might feel comfortable with on any given Tuesday afternoon, because life will eventually be a lot harder and more dramatic than the work-a-day way most of our years are spent. Try to dispense with some of the judging lenses that Episcopalians so often wear that preclude embracing that which we can't define or understand or rationally explain. Explore how your faith touches you, guides you, steers and comforts and empowers you when you aren't at your best, when you are not thinking clearly, when you feel alone and lonely and at your wits end. Because that is all on us, how we experience and respond to the world around us. Jesus Christ, is just waiting for us reach out to Him, to stop saying no to His enduring invitation into Himself. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." What helps you remember that truth when things are not in any way how you would choose? Jesus saves: how can you let Him save you? AMEN