**“It’s Not About You” – October 11, 2020**

Good morning, Guilford Park family and friends. To those of you who do not know me, I am Korey Hickling, and I have been a member of Guilford Park Presbyterian Church for nearly 10 years. My husband, Robert, and my in-laws, Bill and Mary Hickling, have been proud members of this church for over 30 years. When I was asked to present a sermon to you all on this Laity Sunday, I hardly felt worthy. For those of you who have never done this before, let me tell … it’s quite intimidating. First off, I’m no biblical scholar. And, this season of life, like for the lot of us, has been very challenging. As much as it is needed, little time has been devoted to worship in our home these past few months. Time seems to tick on, unaware of our needs. As Bishop Michael Curry says, “God is mediated through community.” And well, over the past several months, our sense of community has been stripped from us in the darkness of a global pandemic, leaving many of us feeling disconnected, anxious, and discouraged. Regardless, I’m going to try my best here to bring us back together, at least virtually, for the next few minutes. So, I ask that you open your heart, as I open mine.

Life as a mom to three young children, one of whom has special needs, and as a part-time intensive care nurse is busy enough in and of itself. Keeping up with the kids’ schoolwork, activities, and therapies; weekly meal-planning; completing unending housework; dealing with the demands of a highly stressful job; maintaining meaningful relationships with friends; serving my community through church and charity work; and giving what’s left of me to nurture a marriage left little room for much else. My plate literally could not get any fuller. And then, a pandemic hit … one of global proportions, and well, we were all asked to slow down and stay home. Except … not all of us could this. While many started working from home and spending time reconnecting with family, others of us, like my husband and me, had to report to our vocations that took us outside of our safety zones. We were all asked to challenge ourselves in a way that had never been asked of us and to question many things that seemed so simple before.

Like never before, I felt my inner strength, my faith, my dedication to my job, and even my devotion to those I love and hold dearest being tested. You see … I’m a mom of a boy who has Down syndrome and Autism. This puts him at a higher risk than most for becoming critically ill from the coronavirus. And, I’m the daughter of parents who are entering into an age group that puts them at higher risk, too. But … I am also a critical care nurse. On one hand, my family means more to me than anything in the world, and I want to protect them at all costs. On the other hand, I have been blessed with the exact nursing skillset needed to help fight this deadly virus. And so, for the first and likely only time in my life, I actually felt what a soldier might feel preparing to go to war. The inner conflict is one of the most difficult I’ve ever experienced. It took weeks of self-reflection, prayer, very difficult and honest conversations with worried family members, anxiety (and full-on panic attacks, if I’m being completely honest), and even telehealth appointments with my physician to discuss anti-anxiety medication … but the CALL TO HELP was simply too strong to ignore. Looking back, there is no doubt to me now that it was God who was leading me. It was as if He was saying, “Korey, it’s not about you. It’s about those who need you.” Thus, I prepared to go to war.

My personal and professional experiences these past few months have afforded me an uncommon perspective. NOTHING about this is simple. Human beings were not made to be separate from each other. We thrive on being together. We have not been living a normal existence and have been cut off from the things that feed and nurture us. Our kids waved goodbye to their friends and classmates at the end of a school day in March, not knowing that it would be the last time they would see them for several months. Parents are having to balance work and their children’s online learning SIMULTANEOUSLY. Teachers are being asked to do the impossible work of instructing young minds in ways they never signed up for. Children, particularly ones like my son Jack, are being asked to learn in an environment that’s not only ineffective, but one that is flat-out distressing, for them. (I mean, Microsoft Teams wasn’t exactly designed for people who are non-verbal.) Essential workers are putting their lives on the line, literally, to help others … but to also help keep food on their tables. People are unable to commune at their places of worship. And all the while, are facing pandemics inside of the pandemic – pandemics of social unrest, of racial tension, of mental illness, of police violence, of political agendas.

The sacrifices we’re being called to make are monumental, but let’s have them be reminders to us of the sacrifice of Jesus who, in the words of Paul, “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.” To the point of DEATH. Every single day I spend serving in the Covid ICU, I ask myself, “is today the day I catch the virus?” I literally count down the minutes of my 12-hour shifts spent in hot, uncomfortable, head-to-toe PPE. But … I press on … because it is through our sacrifices that we confirm our love for one another. Just as Jesus confirmed His love for us. And, it is here where I found a comfort and a strength that I never knew I had. The first chapter of Phillippians tells us, God “has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.” It’s simple: It’s not about you.

You may have heard or seen a certain quote circulating. It says, “We isolate now so that when we gather again, no one is missing.” While eloquent, this quote is a bit too optimistic for my taste. You see … the truth is MANY will be missing at the end of the pandemic. And, many already are missing -- over a million worldwide, to be exact. I’ve seen the missing with my own eyes. I’ve held their hands while they took their last breath without any of their loved ones present. I’ve seen with my own eyes them panic with air hunger. I’ve prayed with their families while they watch them pass away over FaceTime. I’ve held up a smart phone for their grieving spouses to say goodbye. I’ve called their family members to deliver the news that they are no longer with us. These are the missing.

It’s quite an interesting time to be a Christian, isn’t it? More than ever, we are being asked to examine our faith. Our trust in God is being challenged day in and day out. I recently spoke to a friend who is a Methodist pastor. One of his congregants reached out to him and shared that he believed that if you just have faith, you won't have to take measures like mask-wearing and social distancing – that trusting in God was enough to keep him safe from the virus. Perhaps this person had been taking inspiration from Psalm 91, which says that God will rescue God's people from everything from pestilence to cobras. Essentially, nothing will hurt you if you only believe enough. Nothing will hurt YOU. But, wait! What does this say about OTHERS? There is much more that God is asking of us. Faith means trusting in Jesus and trusting in Him means living our values as he has taught us to live. Our salvation – the life that Jesus wants for us – depends on putting our trust in Him and by being the person He wants us to be. Philippians, Ch. 2 tells us to “look not to your own interests, but the interest of others.” Likewise, Matthew Ch. 7, verse 12 says, “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” and Mark, Ch. 12 instructs us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The message is loud and clear here. Over and over, the scripture tells us that the way that the world will know we are followers of the Lord, is to love one another. You see, it’s not all about you.

We live in an age of “self,” meaning it’s all about MY self, my needs, MY rights, MY individual options. An individual in conflict with Covid-19 guidelines is a perfect example of this. The gospel in Phillippians tells us to lead our lives in a way completely opposite of this. It teaches that we are not the center of the universe. Life, especially the life God wants us to lead, does not exist to consistently meet our human needs. Paul writes, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” We are asked to humbly regard others, but we are asked to go deeper and regard others more than we regard even ourselves -- to live selfless lives, not selfish lives. To bear one another’s burdens. To have worth in others’ lives.

Jesus being fully human in solidarity with us meant not calling in the special favors to which he was entitled for himself (being the son of God). It's absolutely staggering that God came to earth in a form so vulnerable that he had to be fed, burped, and changed. And then, in his public ministry as an adult, Jesus sided with the least, the last, and the lost rather than the rich, the powerful, and the self-righteous. If he called in any favors, it was on behalf of the weakest and most vulnerable. Most of us cannot work miracles, but we can follow Jesus' example by doing what is in our power to promote health and wholeness - especially for the vulnerable among us. We can follow this example of compassion by staying home when we are able, by social distancing, by wearing a mask in public. We can make the decision to not behave like human lives are cheap. Paul asks us “to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” This is a plea for us to work together, practice prudence, and show respect for one another’s lives, especially in times of crisis.

Our faith in God means also trusting that God gave us knowledge to be used for healing. It gives us allowance to trust science. One pastor in Tennessee shared this on social media: “I trust God … and I wear my seatbelt. I trust God … and I wear a motorcycle helmet. I trust God … and there are enough life jackets in my boat for everyone on board. I trust God … and I use oven mitts with really hot dishes. I trust God … and I lock my house at night. I trust God … and I have smoke detectors in my house. I trust God … and I take my prescribed medicines. I trust God … and I will follow the best guidelines to share the task of flattening the curve. Acting with caution and wisdom does not indicate a lack of trust in God.” Again, we can be people of faith and still trust science.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that to each of the people who come to Him for healing, Jesus says “Your faith has made you well.” Sure, having faith means looking to Him for healing, but it’s not just that simple. Having faith means also placing our lives in Jesus’ hands and living our lives according to the values of love, compassion, mercy, grace, and concern for others. It means living as Jesus lived and as Jesus died. I am confident we can all agree that Jesus, in his most humble human form, would have worn a mask if it meant protecting the vulnerable amongst him. He certainly wouldn’t be walking around mask-less, boasting, “Nothing can hurt me – I’m the son of God!” Not at all – we know that Jesus, as he always did, would be leading by example and protecting our most vulnerable.

Many of you in our congregation are older. We follow Christ’s example by wearing a mask for you. Because, knowing God IS love, and love is understanding that it’s not all about us. It’s about our grandmothers and grandfathers. It’s about your uncle with heart disease and your neighbor with diabetes. It’s about your friend undergoing chemotherapy. It’s about our church members in nursing homes. It’s about Jack. It’s about Margaret Fields.

I have heard that some fundamentalist Christians claim that the pandemic is a result of God’s judgement on us for our sins. I personally prefer to believe that it’s basis is purely scientific. And, what if instead it’s our love for one another – our faith rather – that is being tested? What if He is actually wants to see how we RESPOND? I ask you now, how do YOU want to respond? Would you rather be the one who reacts to crises with mistrust, narcissism, disdain, and defiance? Or, would you rather be the one who responds to crises with love, compassion, grace, mercy, and concern for others? Is wearing a mask uncomfortable? Absolutely. Is staying home inconvenient? Sure. Is keeping distance from our older loved ones heartbreaking? Devastatingly so. Is being unable to convene with our faith communities difficult? You bet. But all these inconveniences that we make on behalf of others’ wellbeing pale in comparison to the ultimate sacrifice that Christ made for us. And it is through our pain and discomfort that we grow in our love. After all, it’s not about you. It’s not about YOU. It’s about each other.

I’m going to leave you now with a passage from Bishop Michael Curry’s book, “Love is the Way”:

*The way of love will show us the right thing to do every single time. It is moral and spiritual grounding and a place of rest amidst the chaos that is often part of life. It's how we stay decent in indecent times. Loving is not always easy, but like with muscles we get stronger both with repetition and as the burden gets heavier and it works.*

**Let us pray …**

*Lord, guide us to protect the lives of our most vulnerable and to show love for the least, the last, and the lost. Lord, lead us to humbly carry the burdens of these uncertain times. We pray for those suffering and for the loved ones of those who are now missing due to Covid-19. Lord, let us go forth and bear with one another in love.*

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