

June 30, 2013

COMPASSION AND COMMITMENT

by Rick Carlberg

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Today I am going to speak on a topic that has been eating at my soul for about 6 months, watching someone I have worked with for over 10 years, my boss Eric, struggle with a difficult disease that is predicted to kill him. Until I started preparing this sermon, I did not realize how much of my personal behavior is affected by this tragic event. Again, please consider this somewhat of a venting of emotion, so it may not be a “normal” sermon message today.

I had one of those weeks 2 weeks ago. Work was difficult. Our company is making changes to make our plants more productive. People are concerned over their new roles and have more questions than answers. Some people have lost their jobs, while hiring is going on in other areas. While the overall organization has this underlying anxiety, they are not affecting my department, Information Technology. No personnel, nor working location changes are planned for us.

But our department has its own anxiety. Our director, Eric, is fighting stage 4 esophageal cancer, a cancer that was found later than it should have. Despite the excellent care he is receiving, he knows, we know, that this care provides an extension of what time he has left. Day by day we see his energy level decline and see the strain on him as he gets his personal affairs in order.

His red hair and full red beard disappeared one weekend between weekly chemo sessions. Eric’s taste for good Kentucky Bourbon has vanished, a byproduct of the chemo. Work is therapeutic for him. He loves it. There are no physical demands on him for this job, but it takes every bit of mental energy to do the job. It always has. It takes his mind off of what is the ultimate challenge we all face. He remains, however, a formidable presence who lives his life based on principles. I have seen him close the door in his office to address behavior problems, but I have also seen him call us together to publicly apologize for his own behavior mistakes. He is the sort of man we all want to work for. Eric lets you get on with your work, but you better do it professionally within the normal limits of decorum.

Eric is a Christian, a Lutheran by practice. He attends his church regularly, but like most of us, keeps quiet about his core beliefs. In short, he is just like you and me, trying to get through life with dignity, independence and as much financial security he can provide for his family.

He told us of his medical condition on Tuesday, January 8, 2013 at 2:33 PM. In his style, it was perfunctory, that he had to take some days off each week as his therapy requires. He managed our expectations about his involvement in the company. Things are to remain normal, though as time progresses our communications with him will be more through email and phone calls to his home or the hospital.

Now, while Eric has his own office, the 4 of us who report to him have cubicles, in what is essentially 1 room. I have noticed over the last few months a decline in our back and forth banter, the good kidding comments between us. The occasional laughter over a support call to help a clueless user has disappeared. We just stay heads down, only talking with one another as our collective work requires. As I think about it, it is a growing sadness. Eric is the glue that holds our department together... and by and large we enjoy working for him. We feel control slipping out of our hands a little more each day. While we honor his request to keep the conversation about work, we know that in the grand scheme of life the work conversation is of less and less importance, not just for him, but us as well.

Now, while I know there are a few information technology, "IT" people here today, I need to let the others of you know something about us. To be good in our craft, you have to be unemotional. You have to keep your wits about you when problems arise. The full intellectual power God has given us, a superior intellect per our own inflated egos, can only be applied when you are not emotionally upset. In short, you need to be in control to address complex issues, many times with conflicting facts, short time frames and occasional user frustration... and that is just not the case now. I find myself less tolerant of people who like to hear their own voice, as if they have the only solution all our company faces. My agitation is growing. The rigid personal control, that self-discipline, that intellectual edge that has been key to my success in IT, is just not there. We have bigger things on our minds, such as what can we do to make Eric feel better? Answer: Just stay focused on the business and engage him as we always have. Ask him questions on guidance of our projects. Let him make the decisions he has always made.

What duties should we begin taking over that he does today to ease his burden? Answer: None. He will let us know. He wants to hold his own in his work assignments.

Now before I totally lose it, we have some good news, for our scripture today helps us cope with this ultimate “life is unfair” challenge. Let’s begin with the reading from **Psalm 77**, which we read today. Verses 1 and 2 describe the problem clearly: *“I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.”* The remaining verses of this Psalm, 11 - 20, recount the deeds of God, leading his people out of the wilderness. The reading clearly shows the anguish of the author. Per my NIV study notes this is a personal prayer, not a national prayer as many Psalms are. The Psalmist clearly is facing one of the most difficult problems of his life, but even in his distress he remembers the great deeds God has done for his faithful. God knows the suffering Eric is going through, and God will help him through this struggle.

Our reading from **Galatians** tells us that *“the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* Throughout his ordeal, I have seen all of these traits in Eric. In the last 6 months there has been only 1 time where I saw him lose his gentleness, and then he publicly apologized for the outburst later that day.

Is it not amazing that even in the most difficult of times we keep to our core values? The more we understand and practice our faith, the fruits of the spirit in this case, the more we just naturally behave this way. It becomes part of our unconscious actions, much like driving a car... when we do not think about applying the brake as we approach a stop sign. We need to remind ourselves of these 9 fruits of the spirit and get to the point where we practice them sub-consciously. Remember, it is our behavior that people see. They do not read our minds, but they see our actions, how we conduct ourselves in our day-to-day living. So remember to be fruity. Show love, show joy, show peace, show patience, show kindness, show generosity, show faithfulness, show gentleness and show self-control. Make it part of your inner being... then people will see your good works and glorify our father in heaven.

The 2 stories from Luke, one about a Samaritan village, the other about would be followers of Jesus highlight why we need to be committed to our

faith. When James and John report back to Jesus that a village will not allow them to stay that night, Jesus just moved on. Yes, he rebuked James and John for suggesting that fire come down and destroy that village, but he moved on. This shows at least 1 fruit of the spirit, self-control, for not commanding the action of destroying the village.

The story of the would-be followers of Jesus makes one point. You need to be committed to God. When you sign up to follow his path of eternal salvation, there is no looking back. The commitment is forever. No changing your mind; no second thoughts. We need to practice in our day-to-day living the Christian principles shown in our scripture today. It takes work, consistent hard work as illustrated by the “hand on the plow” comment by Jesus, to make this life in Christ as fruitful as we make it. So be committed to the principles shown in our scripture read today. No turning back. No turning back. No turning back.

Recently, Eric was given a handicap parking placard to hang from his rear view mirror. He is able to walk well, so I asked him why he got it. It is due to neuropathy, the loss of feeling in his feet and somewhat in his hands due to the chemo therapy. So while he has to walk less due to the nearby handicap parking spot for him, he has not changed. The principles of life still guide him, the fruits of the spirit are still with him, and his hand is still on the plow... looking forward, not backward to what God has in store for him. He is accepting of what is happening to him, yes – still fighting, but is more concerned about his wife and family that they will be OK after he is gone. As for fighting this ugly disease, please keep Eric in your prayers. He has an important decision to make about treatment options this week.

So, while we are on our own journey with God, remember the lessons Eric is teaching us and the scripture read today. Live by your principles. Let your actions show the fruits of the spirit God has developed within you. Commit yourself to Christ. The journey is long for most of us, and we need to make the best of what time we have on this Earth. You never know when God will call us home. We are who we are in the most difficult of times, when standing for something is the most difficult. During these times let our faith in Christ reflect the fruits of his spirit and our commitment to him.

Amen