

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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For the past 15 years I have kept a photograph on my desk in the office. I have several of them there, in fact, but this is the only one that isn't a member of my family. It's a tiny naked baby whom I am cradling in my hands, lowering her into the baptismal font at St. Ambrose Church in Woodbury where I was then serving. Just next to me are her parents, friends of mine, the father beaming with joy and the mother looking on with what she later admitted to me was a bit of terror. That little baby is now 15 years old, in high school. I happened to see her over the summer at a Catholic retreat experience where I was asked to celebrate mass.

This past week her mother called to request prayers for her daughter. Out of nowhere, during a routine physical exam, an inoperable tumor was found in her—cancer. Surgeons spent 12 hours on Thursday trying to remove it, and they couldn't. Right now, that girl is under sedation, and the next day or two will determine whether or not she will recover. Mom asked for my prayers, and in turn I ask for yours. I cannot imagine the fear...but I don't have to imagine their faith. They've got it.

So I've been staring at that photograph, such a terrible mixture of vulnerability, joy and worry all wrapped up in that image. To embrace life is to embrace both possibility and risk. To embrace the Christian life in baptism is no different. To accept the Lord's invitation to work for God's kingdom among all these other Christians is to agree to whatever that may be required of us, some of it out of our control. To embrace life is to step out of ourselves and to be in the presence of mystery, together, as one family—both the mysteries that elate us and those that could threaten to shatter us if we try to confront them alone.

That is why we Catholics are so convinced that we must never be alone as we journey to God. There really is no true joy that is experienced all alone, and there is not important burden that can be endured alone. And there are few occasions when it can feel more lonely—or when we are tempted to *want* to be alone—than the occasions of serious illness or weakness or the spectre of death. My friends understand that very well this week, which is why their response to this frightening news was not to turn inward but rather to reach out to their friends in the church, whose help they know they desperately need now.

Today here at St. Pascal's we are celebrating together the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, as we do together in public twice each year. It is our statement, our remembrance, that those who suffer threats to health of mind or body or spirit need never have to do that alone—and should not. Their vulnerability is an opportunity both for them to express their faith in public, and for us to express our resolve to surround them with prayer and love—in public. It's what being church *is*.

St. Paul in today's second reading encourages us to do exactly that:

“Brothers and sisters...make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding...will keep you through every joy and every sorrow, every victory and every threat.”

We have no shortage of threats in our world, as the horrors of Las Vegas have reminded us this week. But for today at this Eucharist, we turn our attention specifically to those among us who ask our prayers, God's healing and help, and Christ's peace.