

Holy Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 16:12-15

### Things You Cannot Bear

Andrew Levy was 14 months old when he was diagnosed with leukemia.<sup>1</sup> Further diagnosis revealed it to be a kind of leukemia that was particularly dire. And then there was worse news: his cancer cells were of rare and especially merciless type. Taken altogether, there were no comparative cases in the medical literature. The medical team said it was like being bitten by a shark and being struck by lightning at the same time.

Andrew's parents embarked on chemotherapy and a bone-marrow transplant that had his mother living with him in a hospital room, away from his father and two siblings, treatments that left one year old Andrew vomiting, moaning, or crying, all day long. They then all moved into a temporary, sterile apartment, to guard Andrew's fragile immune system. From there they decided, when they could, to move into a new home, to begin a new life. But the cancer returned. Doctors advised a second attempt at a bone-marrow transplant, which would have even more unlikely odds. Andrew's family could not bear it. They decided to stop treatment, and they began to prepare for the worst, for the inevitable, to say goodbye.

Then something mysterious happened. In the midst of hospice, an unimaginably painful period in which he appeared to be dying, Andrew would occasionally show signs of his old healthy, happy-go-lucky self. The signs increased in frequency and duration. In time Andrew was retested. The cancer had disappeared. The transplant doctor said, "It does feel a bit like a miracle." The lab analyst noted, "It certainly defied our expectations with no discernible basis of happening. I guess that may be the definition of a miracle."

Defied expectations, with no discernable basis of happening—I will take that definition of a miracle: something we cannot prescribe, and have no reason to expect, and that offers an abundance we cannot comprehend.

I am drawn to stories like these—but they are not the only stories. For every story like Andrew's, there are scores of others: stories in which the ravage of cancer moves relentlessly on, or stories where the hard and haunted life ends in an overdose, or stories where the business, the organization, the work to which you gave your all, crumbles. All those stories are all too familiar. You know them. I know them. We don't just know them, we live them.

I am drawn to Andrew's story—though I do not tell it to suggest an easy, a false, hope. Andrew's mother recoils from that. After all she has had to bear, Andrew's mother struggles to reconcile bitterness and gratitude, and how to live in the present while the future is still unknown. How do you bear that? How do we bear that?

I think these things are some of what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel, when he says, "I have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them right now." Jesus says this as he is saying goodbye, in a speech he gives, looking ahead to, his death: "I have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them right now." These many things that we cannot bear, these include the suffering, and the abundance, the long illness, the defied expectations—all of the undiscernible happening that is life, the miracle that is life, the painful, beautiful miracle that is

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Levy's story appeared in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, June 15, 2016. "When Do You Give Up on Treating a Child With Cancer?" <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/magazine/childhood-cancer-treatment.html>

life. We feel that, when a child is born: what a miracle they are. Every life a miracle of science—and a miracle of something that science cannot fully explain.

It is a miracle that any one of us are born, and yet another miracle, that we can be reborn, reborn in the waters of baptism. We celebrate this again today—not with a baby, but with a grown-up. With Terri we reaffirm the miracle, and the mercy, of baptism, of rebirth, of the grace that is for us, whatever age we are, grace that is the greatness of God's love revealed in Jesus—not an easy answer, but true hope. Not the avoidance of dying, but another kind of living.

Such is the greatness of God's mercy, such is the mysterious workings of the Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus promises, even in the face of death, the Spirit that brings Terri here, the Spirit that brings others here—new members, we celebrate them, too. We celebrate how in each of them, God is working in mysterious ways. In each of us, God is working mysterious ways. Is it not a mystery that any of us have come to be here? Is it not a mystery that we can come to be who we are here? I think of this especially on a Sunday we celebrate children. I think of the mystery of how children grow, how they mature, how they come to be who they come to be. Sunday school teachers see this again and again, they see children defy expectations. So also in us, no matter our age.

There is no discernable basis for any of this happening, but for what God does, for what God is. There is no discernable basis for any of it but for one, great story: the story of God's love for us, in Jesus, through the Spirit; God's creative, and redeeming, and ongoing love for us; the miracle that we have been born, the mercy that we can be reborn, the mystery that we may come to be what God would have us be.

These are the meanings on my mind, this Sunday of the Trinity: miracle, mercy, mystery. I thought of titling the sermon that, or maybe, "What is the Trinity?" But last week, when I called the sermon, "What is the Holy Spirit?" my daughter pointed out that I never answered the question. Nor would I today; nor could I today. What Trinity is is greater than we could bear. But this we confess: We believe in God the creator, and the Son who saves, and the Spirit who is working in us, and in the church, through the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins, and the raising of bodies, and the life everlasting. Amen.