



DESIGN GROUP International™

Fighting Disease, Not Death Building a platform of praise on the circumstances of our lives

Luke 4: 14-30

2 Kings 5: 1-19

I am now nearly six months into my study of Irish, also called Gaelic, an ancient language that few speak as their first language anymore. It is slow, but I enjoy learning more about the roots of the language we speak alongside the roots of Greek and Latin.

My current area of learning is how to give directions. One phrase caught my attention as I prepared this sermon: *Téigh díreach ar aghaidh*. It essentially means "go straight." But what it really says is more difficult to translate into another language. A close approximation is "go in the direction of your face." I like this idea: in of telling someone how to get to where they want to go, they need to point their face in the direction and then follow their face.

Perhaps you will remember the posture for Christian living discussed a few weeks ago, that of a person on their knees with arms and face lifted to God. Learning that Irish phrase reminded me of that posture. How do we live the Christian life? *Téigh díreach ar aghaidh*. We are no longer facing the direction we were. Now we face a new one. Let us go straight, following our face, for if we alter this course, we no longer face the direction of our Savior and are no longer reaching out to embrace our salvation.

The need for *Téigh díreach ar aghaidh* comes when painful struggle of any sort enters our experience. If we do not face the direction our faith takes us in those moments, continuing in the direction of our face, we will end up facing one of three other directions.

- **Despair.** We can call this not choosing to fight disease or death. This response is a resignation from life. It is dying before one is dead.
- **Denial.** This can be called choosing to fight disease and choosing to fight death. This response is a refusal to admit the problem exists, and an expectation that no-one will raise the issue.

Interestingly, both of these responses might ask for silence, but for different reasons. Despair doesn't want to discuss troubling matters because it doesn't see any point to it. Denial wants no discussion so that it can delay having to deal with what it doesn't want to admit exists.

- **Destructiveness.** We can label this a choice to inflict disease and death on others. This may be as mild as a tongue lashing or as severe as terrorism. Both are acting out of anger so that others can feel the same misery the suffering person has felt or is feeling.

Here is a practical illustration of these three undesirable responses. In my first days working with North Danvers Mennonite Church, a number of you told me you felt as if this congregation had experienced four funerals this spring: the retirement of a pastor who served you so well followed by three successive waves of funerals of faithful servants, including your former pastor's wife. That is a lot of loss for any community to bear! And now you must choose how to face the future of this congregation and its leadership, realizing that change has only begun when everything about this congregation may have seemed so much more manageable before.

Some will be tempted to throw up their hands and say *"There is nothing I can do,"* abandoning deep involvement in their church community because they feel it no longer belongs to them in the way it once did. In fact, some may stop their participation altogether—not returning until after a new pastor is firmly in place and succeeding, if they return at all. This is a **despair** response.

Some will press hard for nothing more to change, possibly appointing themselves to the "sameness police," trying to keep everything else as it was. Their great hope is that the loss and the pain associated with it can be permanently exiled. This is a **denial** response.

Others will be tempted to lash out, making hurtful comments so that the pain they feel isn't just theirs to carry. Perhaps if others are also hurting, they will somehow feel better about their own pain. This is a **destructive** response.

These are the ways we might respond if we do not keep going straight, believing that the God who made us, saves us and provides for us will meet us in the future we cannot yet see. We know God has provided for and met us in the past, but believing in and then living toward God meeting us in the future forces us to choose to face our faith and go in the direction of our face all over again.

Before going further, let us be assured of a fundamental truth. Unless the Lord returns before the moment of your death, you are going to die. And, you will pick up a number of painful and suffering experiences along the way, including a bed of affliction for most. Pain and death happen to everyone. ***These experiences will either break us or make us.*** The stories we find inspiring are of those people who did not break, those people who did not despair, deny the reality of their suffering or become a destructive force in the lives of others. Rather, they built a platform on that brokenness upon which to serve God and others. They are the people who responded to good news, recovered their sight, claimed their freedom, and shook off their oppression, in order to face their faith and *Téigh díreach ar aghaidh.*

Jesus speaks of this experience with liberty and freedom as he steps up to read from Isaiah's scroll (Luke 4) and announces his ministry. He tells us he was in the world to start the world's turning toward the Kingdom of God—to help any human who would turn away from despair, denial and destructiveness and face God.

When we hear this text read and proclaimed, we tend to focus on Isaiah's word and not what Jesus said beyond his statement that Isaiah's words were now fulfilled. When we stop there we avoid and ignore one of the most difficult of Christ's teachings to bear.

But in this moment we are going to consider what Jesus says. Just after saying that God's promise to do these outstanding things for poor, blind, imprisoned and oppressed people, Jesus tells his hometown audience they are not likely to experience what he is bringing. These were the people who raised Jesus, taught him about God and encouraged his belief. These were the people most primed to be familiar with what God would do, and yet they were not to experience it.

Jesus then refers to the time of Elijah and Elisha—other times where God's mighty works did not come to everyone. Widows and lepers could be found in abundance in Israel, but none of them had their oil and flour miraculously never empty out, or had their skin cleansed. Instead, it was a widow in Lebanon and a visiting enemy from Syria who benefitted. The widow of Zarephath and Naaman the leper were not worshippers of God previously.

We should note that these two did something most humans would not do, something we admire even today. The widow agreed to give her last meal to the prophet in an outlandish display of hospitality. Naaman had to go on a pilgrimage into enemy country, losing every shred of pride, bathing in a dirty river for no good reason. Both were people acquainted with deep suffering as they did this. The widow was the picture of famine we prefer not to look at. Naaman was the picture and stench of putrefied flesh. And yet, instead of despair, doubt or acting destructively; instead of pity parties, miserableness or demanding to be left alone, they decided to go in God's direction. And in doing so they found God's provision and a measure of healing, this work of the Kingdom Jesus Christ is describing as he announces the kingdom.

And don't think that this is the end of their story. It was not the end, but the means for more of God's work to be done. The widow's provision was not just for herself or her son, but to continue providing and sustaining the prophet she had cared for with her original act of hospitality—even if it was only bread and water. Naaman's cleansed body was not simply freedom from leprosy, but a freedom to become a worshipper and a benefactor to make it possible for others to worship God. Both needed to leave all self-centeredness, sulking and self-pity behind, even though they had more right to them than most. Their great faith puts them among the heroes that inspire us and offer correction for our attitudes—even today.

Jesus tells us about his ministry, and then provokes us, telling us we won't benefit from it. What he will do will pass us by even though we are right here among a religious community. If we want to join his movement, we have to drop our false pretense and piety, including the false pretense that this world is heaven and our purpose is to be comfortable. We must face God again, and discover that God is enough.

Over the past twelve years our family has struggled to live through successive waves of cancer occurrences experienced by my wife Lorie. At this point we have lived beyond sixteen occurrences, having just recently learned that what we thought might be a seventeenth is not something to be concerned about for the moment.

I could draw on a number of moments where I learned I needed to keep going in the direction that faith faces, and how miraculous interventions and provision came. The one that most easily comes to mind is when Lorie had more than twenty tumors in her lungs and was in intensive treatment that threatened her life almost as much as the cancer did. Lorie's short-term memory was gone and my children were in open dispute about whether I should remarry if Lorie passed. This was the deepest shadow that ever clouded my spirit. It was a moment of despair. I remember turning to God and asking for something-----just a little something. I thought I could no longer bear up under the weight of it. It was only a matter of hours before a wise friend reached out and ministered to me, not knowing how awful things had become. She helped me correct my perspective and face these circumstances straight on, rather than be caught up in despair.

Lorie's short-term memory loss and the threat to her life continued for some months after that. My children's responses to the possible loss of their mother continued, but I was now focused on cherishing every moment, thanking God for the gifts we had known, and looking for what else God might accomplish in our lives instead of mourning over what was lost.

Facing straight in that moment and the moments since got me unstuck. Even more, this renewed perspective made it possible to become a husband, a father and a participant in ministry once more. And as I participated in this renewed way, I found a good deal of my preferences about life and family and church were gone. So was my ambition and definition of success. It was enough to have work, to be in a family and to gather in worship. It didn't matter what my family did. It was enough to be together. I stopped worrying about where the next work would come from. Having work of any type was enough. I stopped caring about the order of worship, the tone of the service or how many people gathered. I was and am happy for any chance to gather to pray, sing and hear from God's word—even if I don't know the songs!

Like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman, Lorie's life has been extended so that God's work can continue. It is not healing that matters in any of these cases, but the bearing up, the facing straight, the continuing on, in spite of the suffering. Whether the suffering ends or continues is not the point because we know suffering will dog us all our days. Rather, it is how we choose to respond to the disease and the dis-ease that inevitably comes. By facing straight, we discover that we can see again, that we are free again and that nothing oppresses us anymore—even if it looks like we are a prisoner of disease or circumstance. Our example of building a platform of praise on the circumstances of our lives becomes a witness that a response other than despair, denial or destructiveness is both possible and preferable—inviting others to a place of embracing salvation.

Do you wish for something to take with you from this reflection? Here are three takeaways:

- Remember: You are not the only person who suffers. Everyone does. You have little control over the where and when of it. You can choose which way your face points.
- Remember: There is no benefit in comparing your struggles with another's to see who is better or worse off. All of us suffer in a unique recipe of circumstance and it brings us all to the same conclusion. All of us are terminal! What you can choose is the way your face points.
- And so, with Christ who lifts up the examples of the widow and of Naaman, we take a stand against all that would lead to despair, denial and destruction. We fight disease and dis-ease that hampers and takes life, fixed on the hope of a Savior who conquers sin, death and the grave. We choose to point our face toward him.

Let us be counted among those who fight disease, but are no longer afraid of death.

A-men.