

September 13 , 2009

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 28-31

Sermon: "My Side of the Story"

I thought I would take this time to share my side of the story, to share with you my experience, and try to answer the question of Where do we go now? I first want to say thank you to this community for your love, support, prayers, food, and nurture. As Mike and I continue to go through this process, we feel your prayers, love and support lifting us up when we are in the darkest valleys and giving us hope when we are remembering Sarah and our time together. I also want to say thank you to the leadership of this incredible community of faith who stepped up and allowed me the time to step away so that I could start my grieving process and begin to try to figure out what normal is for me now. I also want to say a special thank you to the staff of Midway Christian Church. Thank you for your pastoral care, for stepping up and helping to lead this church, and for being an amazing staff.

And because of all of your support, love and prayers, I am able to come back to this pulpit and preach the Good News. I know that many of you are worried that I am coming back too fast or taking on too much. But I want to reassure you that I have never been the type of person that could just sit around and do nothing. Both Mike and I are trying to find a sense of normalcy in our lives. So I am easing back into work, knowing that in October and maybe later in the year, Mike and I are planning on taking some time to rest, renew, and restore.

These past few weeks have been a whirlwind for all of us and I know that there are a lot of unanswered questions, so I will try to answer them the best that I can. I want you to know that I am in a good place with Sarah's death. I also know that there will be good days and bad days. And that the pain of losing Sarah will always be with me and will shape me for years to come. But I also know that the joy and love that I experienced as Sarah's mom will also always be with me and will shape me for years to come.

So here it is. My side of the story....

Mike and I took Sarah to the neurologist's office on Friday August 7th because the pediatrician said that it was time to see what was going on and why Sarah wasn't hitting her physical milestones like she should. But she wasn't worried. She really just wanted to rule out all possibilities. So we got up on the morning of the 7th and went to the doctor, not really knowing what awaited us. The doctor examined Sarah, asked us questions and finally said, "I think it is SMA Type 1. It is a disorder that degenerate the muscles," And my first thought was "Okay, we can take a pill or do some exercises. No big problem." We left the doctor's office and I immediately went home to look up SMA on the internet and discovered that it was fatal in infants. That was a bad weekend for the McColl's but finally Mike said, "Sarah is healthy, happy and she is here. If this is all we have, then we will enjoy her." But we held onto the hope that she was making progress in physical therapy and she was a healthy child. In looking back, I think both Mike and I started grieving that day in the neurologist's office because well, for me, I guess you could say it was Mother's instinct. I just felt in my heart that I had limited time with Sarah and I started grieving that day.

When we admitted her to the hospital, we were still clinging to the hope that she would be okay and this would all pass. Even that first night the doctors told us that it was pneumonia and that we would be out of the hospital in a few days. Little did we know how our world would change in those few days. There was still hope. The doctors were still working to help Sarah get over pneumonia. The SMA tests results were still not in, but they were the white elephant in the room.

Our goal from the beginning was to get Sarah home and we all were working towards that goal. And then it became evident that that transition was not going to be easy. On Tuesday, Sarah didn't pass a swallow test. The formula was going directly into her lungs. And then we knew that we were in a different situation. Our goal still was to get Sarah home, but it was going to be a little different. Conversations began about feeding ports, oxygen tanks and tracheotomies and the question came before Mike and me: How far do you want to take this medical care for your daughter?

It was decided that we would call Hospice in and get Sarah home. So on Wednesday morning, we began that process. And about lunchtime, our world shifted and we were in another wilderness place. Basically our 8 month daughter had a heart attack in process of being handed to her grandmother. And we learned that our daughter was much more fragile than we all realized. We took her off tubes and wires and sat with her. And it was beautiful. Sarah was held by grandparents, her aunt and uncle, and her mother and daddy. In that moment, we experienced God's greatest gift: Love.

We thought she would go quickly, but she is my daughter and is a fighter. So we had one last night to cuddle up with her, share stories, kiss her, and to just be with her. We woke up Thursday morning and decided to take her home. And as soon as we walked in the doors of our home, Sarah was at peace. She spent time with her animals. She got a bath with her daddy and mommy. And she got to have one last taste of her mom's milk. And then she went home, to be with God, to crawl, to sit up, and to be with all the other SMA angels that were waiting to greet her.

There are so many things that my daughter taught me during her life and through her passing. I will be grateful that I had an angel in my midst, that she chose me to be her mother, that I was able to experience life's true blessings. I am thankful that Sarah is not suffering. One of the cruelest things about this disorder is that the child's mind is very active and they are unusually bright but their bodies won't move. So these children are trapped in a body and as a mother, that was a sight that I could not and did not want to bear. To watch helplessly while my child is trapped and there is nothing that I could do about it.

I am also thankful that I got to know my Sarah Bear as Sarah my baby, my child rather than Sarah the SMA patient or Sarah with tubes and feeding ports. As part of my grieving process, I have gotten in touch with families who have lost loved ones or are still dealing with SMA. Their stories are heart-breaking. Many families lose their babies before they get to know them or some families' homes have been turned into mini hospitals and they are always worried about their child getting sick.

I am thankful that I was able to provide Sarah with a loving home, a wonderful family, a loving and supportive church family and was able to give her a life free from tubes, ports, and doctor's offices. And I also think this was Sarah's gift to me as well. I believe that she fought this disorder with every fiber of her being. (She was stubborn. I'm not sure where she got that) And at the end, it was too much for her.

I also know that there will be days that I will not be in such a good place. And that is why Mike and I are going to continue to see Rick Landon, a counselor with the Interfaith Counseling Center. He did our pre-wedding counseling and we had actually gone to see him while Sarah was in the hospital.

I will also let you know that Mike and I are going to see a geneticist in a week. We will be discussing genetic counseling. And we are going to see a local agency about adoption. Both Mike and I know that we loved being parents so we are taking a look at our options for other children.

This is probably more than you wanted to know but I felt like I needed to be as honest as possible with you as we go along this journey together, loving one another, supporting one another, and praying to God for God's guidance and wisdom as we come together as Midway Christian Church.

Once again, thank you for your love, support and prayers. There really is power in prayer. There is power in the Holy Spirit. There is power in the love of a community of faith. Which leads us to the question of Where do we go from here? We have experienced a great loss in our community and we are hurting. And we once again turn to the grace of God to see us through. One of the things that I was most afraid of during this time, is how do I preach the Good News again? How will I be able to step up in the pulpit and say God is good? Well, it is with great faith, and supported by the very hands of God, that I can step up and say that God is good. God was with us from the very beginning of this process and God has watched over us. And God has led us through to the other side. I will admit that there have been times and will continue to be times that I am angry with God and don't feel like talking or feel that God is silent. But as a wise friend said, "Faith is about not stopping the conversation." My God's shoulders are big enough for me to be angry. My God's heart is large enough to embrace our grief. And My God's grace is healing enough that I know this world does not have the last word. And I also know and find peace in knowing that God is angry at the situation as well. God is angry at the fact that there are such places as PICU and NICU. And God is angry that there is such a thing as SMA.

And that is why I can say that God is good.

Through this process, one question has been on my mind. How do people make it through life's tragedies or life in general without a firm foundation of faith or without a community supporting them, loving them, praying with them, getting angry with them, celebrating with them? And I realized that they don't. They don't get through life. They don't see God's grace or experience God's healing because they don't know or have shut the door and stopped the conversation. So the good news is that we have experienced what it means to be true community through this experience and we are called to share that experience with those who are in need of this good

news. We have experienced God's grace and God's healing touch. And now we are called to take these things beyond our doors.

The day after Sarah passed, I was working in the yard and some friends approached me to give me their love. And one of them said, "I want to share something with you. I dreamed about Sarah last night. She was in heaven and in the arms of Ruth Roach and she was surrounded by lots of Midway people who couldn't wait to hold her. And then this man came up, and I think he was supposed to be Pinkerton and he said, "You know people give me credit for that school up on the hill in Midway, but it wasn't me. It was that little girl at the revival. That little girl who touched my heart, that little girl who opened my eyes to God's calling, that little girl who helped me to find God's calling."

And my friend said, "I don't think Sarah's ministry is done yet. Her ministry is to show us how to live out Christ's compassion here on earth. Her ministry is to show us how we can be true community for those who are hurting, for those who are seeking, for those who want to start the conversation again.

Sarah's ministry is not done here on earth."

And I would agree. Sarah's ministry on earth is not done. Because of a little girl, we as Midway Christian Church are challenged to show God's grace to all of God's children. Because of a little girl, we as Midway Christian Church are challenged to share God's healing touch with all who are hurting. Because of a little girl, we as Midway Christian Church are challenged to open our doors, to live out our mission of WELCOME, and to be an example of true community for all of God's children.

Because of a little girl, we have experienced God's grace and God's love. And because of a little girl, we can share the good news once more. And because of a little girl, we can proclaim that this world does not have the last word. God does.

Because of a little girl, we as Midway Christian Church have found God's direction and calling. We are to be God's heart, God's hands here on earth and to be God's true community for all of God's children.

May we find hope, healing, and renewal because once again God has challenged Midway Christian Church because of a little girl. Amen.

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