

“Fearless Love” – Stephanie Wing, 5.10.09

As I worked on my sermon last week, I was stopped in my tracks by a message from my friend Steve. Steve and his wife Bridget were members of my small group at church in Boston. Steve was a bit more reserved, but Bridget was full of life and very outgoing. Steve worked with numbers, and Bridget was a star recruiter for a major company. Bridget had the kind of smile that can't be contained – it stretched across her whole face and illuminated everything in sight. Steve and Bridget were two of the first people I got to know at Park Street, and they made me feel at home right away. During our mutual time there we laughed together, prayed together, and even shared some tears. I moved from Boston to Louisville to go to Seminary. About a year later, Steve and Bridget had their first child, a beautiful girl named Grace. After a while, they made the decision to move the family to Portland, Oregon, where most of Steve's family lived.

Grace was just two when Steve and Bridget found out they were expecting their second child. They were thrilled. Early on Bridget experienced some fatigue as well as some blood clots, both of which were attributed to the pregnancy. However, one weekend she was in such pain that she went into the emergency room. Last week marked the one year anniversary of Bridget's sudden and completely unexpected diagnosis of aggressive and terminal cancer. She was just 35, and at the time of her diagnosis she was 20 weeks pregnant. Four days before Mother's Day, Steve and Bridget learned that she wouldn't make it to the next Mother's Day, that two-year old Grace would grow up without her mommy, and they were left with questions and tough decisions to make regarding her then half term pregnancy. The baby couldn't survive at this gestational stage, but without chemotherapy, which could harm the baby, Bridget probably could not live long enough to give the baby enough time to grow and develop.

Bridget and Steve decided to go with chemotherapy, but in the following weeks the placenta showed signs of degradation. At a gestational age of just 26 weeks and 6 days, the baby was delivered by C-section. Chloe Faith was just 1 pound 2 ounces and 12 inches long when she was born. I remember an early photo where Chloe was wearing Bridget and Steve's wedding bands, which fit easily around her upper arm. Chloe was diagnosed early with a perforated lung, but as that slowly closed on its own, all signs looked good as Chloe gained strength. Bridget, on the other hand, continued to suffer and her health rapidly declined. The doctors did everything they could, but after more surgeries and medical procedures, the prognosis only got worse. Finally her medication was stopped, the family gathered,

and as they started to pray together, just a few minutes into the prayer, Bridget entered eternal peace on August 12th, 2008.

Now, one year after the terminal diagnosis, Steve and his two daughters are facing their first Mother's Day without Bridget. Grace is now a precocious 3 year old who wants to be a doctor when she grows up, to take care of sick people like her mommy. Chloe is a miracle baby. Despite the chemotherapy and her extremely early birth and low birth weight, she is a healthy, though delicate, beautiful baby girl who has cleared many hurdles and defied all odds.

Last week Steve wrote: "Please continue to pray for my girls, myself, and all those family and friends that knew Bridget as we come into both the 1-year anniversary of her terminal diagnosis as well as my girls' first Mother's Day without their mom on this earth. For all of us who still have living mothers in our lives, give them something extra this Sunday. Tell them a little more about your thankfulness for them, share with them a formative moment they participated in, and savor the gift that I often take for granted...that my mom is still alive and in my life."

One of the most amazing things to me in Steve and Bridget's experience is that through this all, they turned to God completely. On the first day Bridget went into the Emergency Room last May, she saw a Bible verse on the wall. Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." It was a verse they saw many times again, coming and going from the Good Samaritan Hospital. Through all of the pain, questions, and trials, Steve and Bridget were firmly grounded in the love and grace of God, which sustained them through this time.

As news spread of Bridget's condition, friends and acquaintances would stop Steve and ask him what they could do. Steve's response was always, "Get to know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior." Bridget's prayer was that through her illness, more people would come to know the love of Christ that had changed her life and given her eternal hope, even in the face of death. As prayer requests were shared among their friends and family, news of their situation spread across the country and even the world. Literally thousands of people in multiple countries were joined in prayer for this family, and even as they prayed for Bridget and Steve, Bridget and Steve prayed that each person who heard their story would come to know the love of God.

I was amazed by Bridget and Steve's courage during this whole ordeal. Bridget was not afraid to die. She was so secure in God's love that she knew there was nothing to fear. Certainly they both struggled with questions and a range of emotions more vast than I can imagine, but they were anchored at the very heart by God's love, and the hope they had because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Our passage from 1st John is one of my favorites. It tells us that it doesn't matter how others treat us, or what our circumstances are, we are always called to love each other and love God, because our love comes from God. God's love changes us. It also says that perfect love casts out fear. Bridget's lack of fear was a testimony to the depth of God's love. She was grounded in God's love, and God's love radiated out from her to everyone she touched. Bridget knew that through everything that she had been through, and everything that lay ahead, both for her and for her family after she was gone, God was there. Bridget experienced and lived into God's fearless love.

Though all approximations and analogies for God's love for us are inadequate, the metaphor of God as both mother and father is important and foundational. God loves us when we, like the youngest infants, are utterly incapable of giving anything in return for that love. God loves us unconditionally, just because we are. And God loves us so much that nothing was held back; God gave the greatest gift in order for us to be reconciled to God forever. God loves us with a fearless love that travels to hell and back so that we might be saved.

There are many comparisons in the Bible of God's care and love for us to that of a mother or father. But even these comparisons fall far short of the reality. Human love is imperfect, but God's love is perfect. Even the most perfect human love will let us down from time to time, but God's love is eternal and unconditional. In 1st John we read that true love comes from God. That means that God shows us true love, but also that the source of all true love in the world is God. The love of a mother is a gift from God, but is still just a reflection of God's amazing and unending love for us.

When we are young, it is critical for us to feel like we are safe and secure. Usually that sense of safety comes from our parents. But there comes a time when we realize that there are dangers that even our parents can't protect us from. We live in a world that requires us to risk. We live in a world that can be scary. Faced with the fears and trials of this world, we too can be sustained by the love of God, who comforts, nurtures, and upholds us in our times of trial. Like a mother who

will not forsake her nursing child, God is faithful and will not forsake us. I pray that no one will have to experience the loss and tragedy of my friends, Steve and Bridget. But I also pray that in whatever trials we face, we will look to God with the same hope and assurance. I pray that we will experience the fearless love of God, and share with all the world the hope and assurance we have, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.