

Dear friends:

Pastor Mike returned to the pulpit on Sunday, March 1 and shared a poignant message about what he has walked through over the past several months. In hopes that this might encourage the FPC community, we wanted to share a condensed version of Pastor Mike's sermon. The full transcript can be requested through the office or accessed on our website (ashlandfpc.org).



In Weakness, Fear, and Trembling
1 Corinthians 2:1-5

First of all, I want to take a moment to extend a heartfelt thank you to this congregation, including the staff and leadership. You have extended an incredible amount of love and grace to me and my family. You have modeled well who we are called to be as God's people through your generous prayers, notes, cards, gift cards, meals, beautiful prayer blanket, and more. We love you and give thanks to God for you. The last time I stood before you was Sunday, December 16th. Much has taken place in my life since that day, and I hope to give you just a small window into that journey this morning.

On December 10th, I was home with my youngest daughter Hayden. In the middle of the afternoon while she was taking a nap, I experienced some severe chest pains that followed with a state of panic. I truly thought I was having a heart attack, but after several hours in the ER and following many tests I was sent home and told I had either experienced some serious acid reflux or a stress-induced anxiety and panic attack. The next day I was back to work, hopeful this was a one-time incident. I experienced some anxiety in the days to follow, but this was familiar to me as I had experienced this type of anxiety a few years ago. "I have been through this before, and I will manage this again," I told myself over the next several days. On December 16th, the last time I stood before you, I struggled to get through the sermon. I kept feeling light-headed and was concerned that

another attack was at hand. I simply kept thinking, "I need to end this sermon and get home as soon as possible." I now know how many of you feel most Sundays!

I managed the following week the best I could and for the first time began a medication that would hopefully help me deal with this new anxiety I was experiencing. On December 22nd, a Saturday night, I had a second and more severe attack. This attack took me into a darkness I would wish upon no one. I felt that I was losing my mind and the ability to control my thoughts. After almost 24 hours of living in a state of panic Mandy and I again went to the ER. Upon arriving to the ER they once again did an EKG, but this time they were calling me back to a room almost immediately where I was met by a team of nurses. On my first trip I thought I was having a heart attack; on this trip it became clear that they thought I was having a heart attack. Let me assure you, this was not the ideal experience for someone about 24 hours into a panic attack. The EKG showed an inverted T wave (which I translated, "I'm clearly going to die if you don't open me up within the next few minutes"). The ER doctor thought it was most likely that I was having another panic attack heightened by the new medication I was on, but they wanted me to stay for observation. However, Samaritan was full so I was "awarded" with an ambulance ride to Grant Hospital in Columbus at 2:30 in the morning.

Following a 12-hour stay at Grant that included several more tests, I was sent home with the knowledge that I had a healthy heart. On my ride home that afternoon, while there were several thoughts and feelings going through my mind, I suddenly became afraid that maybe all of this truly was anxiety and stress-induced. What might this mean for the days ahead? I went home and slept for 15 hours, and then awoke to the realization that I was on a journey "not of my own choosing."

There was a Rocket Mortgage commercial that aired during the Super Bowl—perhaps many of you have seen it. It stars Jason Momoa from *Game of Thrones*. He is a large, muscular "manly man" with long "Sampsonesque" hair. The commercial shows him coming home and removing layers of his muscles little by little, and ultimately his long

hair until what's left is a frail, bald individual. In a lot of ways this commercial is an analogy of what happened to me in what seemed like a very short period of time. I felt as though I had been stripped of everything that I was. I could sense no strength in myself. I found myself scared to death; at times truly scared that I was dying. I was in a lot of physical, emotional, and mental pain. I found myself in a darkness unlike anything I had previously experienced. The most simple things became very difficult. I was shedding more tears than ever before in my life and I knew I needed help. I was scared about how long this journey might last, if or when there would be a way out, and what life might look like moving forward.

I have certainly made progress, but I'm still on the path of healing. The last two months have been a whirlwind filled with at least a dozen doctor appointments, countless exams and tests, hours spent in counseling, and various attempts to find helpful medications that I could tolerate. I have prayed more earnestly and wept more frequently and deeply than perhaps any other time in my life. I am thankful that I am slowly but surely making progress. I'm standing before you doing something right now that a few months ago seemed impossible. I also know that at any moment, if needed, I can say *amen*, pray, and walk out this door.

I choose to be here for a few reasons: First, I value honesty and authenticity and have always tried to live my life before others in that way. I want you to know that this illness has impacted my whole self.

Second, vulnerability is our greatest weapon against shame. Some of you have heard me use the phrase "name it to tame it." When we speak our fears, anxieties, and weaknesses, it takes away the power that they have over us. It brings darkness into the light, and it takes the enemy's most effective tool for preventing us from becoming who God has created and called us to be out of his toolbox.

Third, I know that as a community we all have struggles, and I want to invite you to consider these as shared struggles among us. Some of you may be struggling with fear and anxiety in a

similar way as I have been. Perhaps for others the struggles are different but very much real and at times just as debilitating. The Body of Christ, by definition, is a place to bare those struggles in an open and honest way, knowing that we are called to come alongside one another in encouragement, support, and love.

I want to turn to the apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth and read for you the first five verses of chapter 2 as our Scripture reading this morning:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Some of you know that at times I listen to a prayer app called "Pray As You Go." On February 8th, this Scripture was the focus of the contemplation. I was having a rough morning and felt particularly stripped of my strength that day. Perhaps you can imagine how this text spoke to me. It came as an invitation from God.

Most of my life I have worked hard to rely on my own strength, to overcome any weakness that might be present in my life, and to stand before you and others as someone who is strong, dependable, and able to carry whatever burden may fall upon me, you, or anyone else. I have always worked hard to be the strong one for others, and at times if I'm honest, even perform when needed to cover up my weakness on any particular day. I don't believe I'm alone in this. We put forth our biggest productions when we anticipate our greatest crowds. And when we are the weakest, we have a tendency to work our hardest to not appear weak, expose our cracks, or give any indication that we may be broken.

On February 8th, like many of the days that I have had over the last 10 weeks, this no longer seemed like a possibility or an option. Would this mean that I would no longer stand in front of you all, or anyone for that matter? Leaving the house was a challenge on days, let alone standing in front of a congregation to preach, especially in the midst of the struggle. I'd like to share some of the words I journaled that morning:

In weakness, fear, and trembling. This is certainly not how I have lived life or come into ministry, but it feels like the way I am being called to move forward. No pretense. No show. No performance or production. This is an invitation to follow the lead of Paul, and the lead of Christ himself, both of whom chose the way of vulnerability.

To be vulnerable is to be more like Jesus. To be vulnerable is to be more human. Vulnerability removes the pressure and alleviates the need to find our value and place in performance. It allows us to simply come as we are and receive the gift of salvation—the unconditional love of the Triune God. Might this not be the greatest gift we can give to God in return? To simply come as we are. Knowing and trusting that we are loved, deeply loved, by a God who welcomes us into His tender love and mercy.

We are surrounded by a pressure to be strong and independent, as if to be weak is to be broken, as if to be broken is bad. But what if the greatest gift we can give to one another is to allow our true selves to shine through the brokenness, to allow the light to burst through those cracks?

This journey of vulnerability is a scary one. It's one of standing in midst of weakness, fear, and much trembling, knowing that God is still present. I have experienced darkness in these weeks, but be sure that I have also experienced light. In times when I was most afraid God enabled me to experience His presence in so many ways. God gives us gifts in those times:

The gift of family, the gift of community, the gift of Scripture, the promise of meeting us in our prayers and in our imaginations, the beauty of nature, the joy of a child, the gift of a simple meal. A reminder that we are forgiven and free. A reminder of a love that is eternally present.

The gift of Jesus Himself, who through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not only meets us at this table but gives Himself to us in this bread and wine as our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual nourishment. May we come, with our whole selves, and exchange our weakness for His strength.

Pastor Mike