

When I started prepping for this sermon I was not excited. Consolation was really not what I want to be talking about on this beautiful spring day. I wished I'd gotten a better spin from the lectionary, but we've drawn readings from Paul's second book to the Corinthians. From this string of readings pulled from 2nd Corinthians, we learn that Paul has a bit of a love/hate relationship with the folks from Corinth. By turns he reproaches and beseeches them, and sometimes I wonder who is the more doubtful about the way of the Lord, Paul or these ancient Greeks?

But let's get back to consolation. For many of us, those of us that are fortunate, **consolation** seems like one of the lesser gifts of God. Personally I'd rather be standing up here telling you about all that I'm grateful for: my recent retirement, a loving and intelligent spouse, the health to pursue the things I love, our visit to our first set of grandchildren, Frankie and Davis, who are 2 & ½ years and 10 months respectively and cuter than a Hallmark card, who have parents who have the time intelligence, will and resources to nurture them like the princes they are. But I shouldn't be telling you about that. So back to consolation.

I don't like to think about the times I needed consolation and could not turn to another person, but there have been such times. I've failed at marriage, not once but twice, the first time clearly my fault, the second, well, the jury is out. But **fault** has nothing to do with the need for consolation. They say that those who have it good fall the hardest. It seemed that way to me when I lost my second marriage near the end of the last century. I had pretty much everything I wanted: a good job I'd worked hard to get, three bright children who had at the least avoided jail time, a ranch house on East Euclid, membership in the largest church in town, healthy hobbies—a pretty good life—but as the marriage collapsed I could no longer enjoy any of those things.

I tried to throw myself into work, but I was often distracted, I tried to talk to my kids, but they were too young and too close to the situation to be my confidants, and even my hobbies of biking and fishing and tennis became times for rumination and recrimination, not relaxation and renewal. Was I religious? Yes, in a conventional and rather intellectualized way. But with the loss of that marriage I learned that God was not some **force** to think about and serve, but some **one** to turn

to, and turn to I did. There was a group of Methodist men who met for “bible study,” but who often strayed widely from that task. They listened to me, guided by God, and they took me out for coffee. They were quite literally the arms of God around my shoulder. I got active in a “self-help” program and, along with a lot of other very sane things, I paradoxically learned that the phrase “Let go and let God” was more than a cliché. I found a way of praying that relied little on language; instead it was just an opening up of my heart to my own suffering so I could see it and let it go into the endless comfort of God’s love. My brain might have made me a Christian **practitioner**, but my hungry heart made me a **child** of God, a man who was learning that not all could be controlled. I hope I never grow out of that. As Paul said, *“For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”* I learned that you can love the Lord and live in Him, even if there are tears coursing down your cheeks.

On a lighter note, I have a habit of reading the obituaries every day and even corresponding with one of my work buddies—Jackie Crawford—who has the same habit. There are a lot of reasons why we do this, not the least of which is to prepare for our own mortality. But one of the other ones is to celebrate these lives and to empathize with the family members who authored the obit in question. Although these writers are seeking condolence in part, there’s something more. I’m convinced that they find a **release** of their grief as they **rejoice** in the lives of those they recently lost. Let me share some pieces of one obit, that of a remarkable woman named Cynthia Mitchell.

Cynthia Rye Mitchell, 81, died on May 9, 2016, at Taylor House Hospice, two weeks after being diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. As usual, she was determined to captain her own ship and this time sunk it with a minimum of fuss.

Over the last 29 years, both her ovaries and her heart tried very hard to kill her but she was having none of it. She was too busy watching her grandchildren be born and grow up, changing jobs in her mid-60s, buying her first house, and stockpiling Kleenex and batteries.

She also lived through two subpar husbands, the death of her son, Ned Mitchell, in 1995, and trying to buy paint at Sears. But that devil pancreas finally got her.

Cynthia was born in Danville, Ill., on July 8, 1934. She was a lifelong journalist, first for the Daily Illini newspaper, published by the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, of which she was an alumna. After moving to Des Moines, she spent nearly 30 years as a very exacting and very respected copy editor at the *Des Moines Register & Tribune*, the first 20 or so of which were fun.

After the fun stopped at the *Register*, she retired from there and moved to Meredith Corp., where she worked as the copy chief of *Traditional Home* magazine for 16 years. Though her plan was to die at her keyboard, she left Meredith shortly before her 80th birthday.

Wherever Cynthia was, she was probably the smartest person in the room. She could curse like a sailor (and in Croatian) – though she almost never did – yet she had exquisite and sophisticated tastes (un-stifled by budgetary concerns).

She gave generously to many causes and organizations and was (literally) a card-carrying liberal who put into practice every day the philosophy of live and let live.

She was a voracious reader and book collector, and loved her beautiful home and garden, especially her front porch. And gin gimlets with plenty of lime. And more than anything, being “Moremom” to her grandchildren.

All who loved her, or even liked her a lot, are invited to drink and eat and toast a life well-lived at an open house, June 25, 2016, from 2 to 5 p.m. at Cynthia's home. The price of entrance is a good Cynthia story. Glasses will be raised in a final huzzah at 4 p.m.

If you'd like to honor Cynthia, please do so in the form of a donation to the Des Moines Public Library Foundation. Or in the form of a really good gimlet imbibed on a lovely front porch.

So does this obit seek consolation or celebration? That's a false dichotomy. It's after both, and achieves both. And whether the author acknowledges it or not, I see the hand of God here, using laughter and history to bring meaning to this amazing woman's passing

I lost my mother in December of 2010, and because I'd recently suffered a leg injury at that time, I was in no condition to fly to Denver to attend her funeral. That made my mourning harder. You see, my relationship with my adopted mother is a very complicated one. There was plenty of abuse at her hands, and the best thing that ever happened to my

childhood is her divorce from my dad, which allowed me to experience the rest of my growing up years with him, not her. The problem with such a complicated relationship is that it also complicates the mourning when you lose the other person. How do you remember such a person without also remembering the tough times you went through because of them? Again, that's where God's consolation comes in.

In my case consolation took the form of learning to just sit and **allow** the mourning. God's grace granted me the ability to turn off the tapes playing in my head. Call it meditation if you will: simply sitting comfortably and waiting until the sounds wear down. That's what I was able to do with my memories of my mom, and with the grace of God I was consoled by the eventual loss of fear and mistrust that so marked my memories of her.

One last thing about consolation. It is not enough simply to receive solace from God. We must actively offer consolation to our fellow humans. As Paul said, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.*" That is a beautiful part of this congregation, our ability to comfort each other, to care for each other. That quality, coupled with Crossroad's drive to serve the needy, is what makes us truly the children of God. In a minute we will engage in the "prayers of the people," which also serves as a sort of verbal message board for our friends here in that room.

We'll likely hear requests for prayers of healing, calls for celebration, and so on. We group of folks may be small in number, but our lives and the lives of those we love, can be wonderfully and horribly complicated. As we respond in turn with "God hear our prayer," we know also that our fellow congregates also hears our prayer and is thinking of us and the ones we pray for. I've rarely left here without seeing one person or another approach another congregante and ask more about the subject of their prayer request. That query is almost always followed by a sign of concern and empathy. There may even be some hugging. On a couple of occasions I've even seen tears. This is the gift we give each other, the gift of consolation, just as God gives each one of us that gift from Herself.

Lord knows I've been the recipient enough times of such spontaneous and heartfelt consolation.

Which brings me back to my grandkids—you knew I'd find a way! Frankie, being 2 & ½ does not believe in walking, at least I've never seen him do it. He just runs! And between the toys he scatters about, his long suffering dog Stanley, and even his little brother on the floor, he manages to make a major wipeout at least once an hour. This generally brings on tears. That's when his mom or dad, or grandpa if Frankie will let him, pick up Frankie, sit him on our lap, and give him our attention until the mishap has been forgotten. Sometimes even it's Stanley the dog who gets there first and gives the little guy a canine (and I'm convinced Christian) lick of comfort.

Now my daughter and her husband would not claim to be Christian; anything but. Their distaste for the Religious Right has colored them against any form of the faith that I hold dear. But, Christian or not, they are channeling God's gift of giving consolation to others. Indeed, their desire to do good in terms of social cases makes them as Christian-like as most people who inhabit a place of worship weekly. And this gift of acting like a Christian, whether one is an orthodox believer or not, is another gift from God. This planet is covered with people of different faiths or no faiths at all who seek to do the will of God, whether they know that's what they're doing or not. Ironically, when I examine the positions of the three remaining candidates for President of these United States, it is the one not claiming allegiance to a Christian god whose policies seem most aligned with the teachings of Christ.

So be consoled or rejoicing as fits your mood today. God is with you to comfort your falls and sooth your spirit, as the need may be. God is in you to do the same for others. And God inhabits all human kind, whether they acknowledge Her or not, as we go our fragile way on this planet.

Benediction: So let us leave knowing that in times of suffering we can find solace in our God. And let us go forth to accept the consolation of God's people, even as we offer consolation, even when unbidden.