

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

June 16, 2013

Celebrating the Life of Donna Tetter

2 Corinthians 4:16-17

Prayer: *Father God, we do thank you for Donna, we thank you for the gift that she was to this church, we thank you that the gift that she was to your kingdom. And Lord, this morning we have a special service in which we want to honor Donna, honor her life, and honor the fact that she spent her life attempting to honor you. And so Lord, I pray that this morning as we open up your word again, as we look into your word for solace, for comfort, for instruction, that you would instruct us by the power of your Holy Spirit and that again, these words may be of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Some time this past Wednesday morning as you all know, Donna Tetter went to be with her Lord. Many of you knew that without my naming her that the person that I spoke about in my message last week at the beginning of my message, it was actually I was speaking about Donna, and I had said that I had called her, and I had asked her permission if I could speak about her struggle, not knowing of course what the following week would bring. And she was anxious to

have her story be a blessing in any way possible. And so last Sunday when I spoke, I spoke anonymously about someone, and I said I'd received a phone call recently from a dear saint who was in tears, and this saint wanted to know, "How can I find the Lord's favor again?" She was desperate at the time because the physical aspects of her disease were beginning to pile up. After having lost her kidney and her leg to diabetes, she had recently lost the tip of her finger, and when she was on the phone with me, she was anticipating losing the rest of her finger to the disease, and I could hear the fear in her voice. And it was not so much a fear of the disease, but a fear that the constant struggle with pain and sickness was some kind of a sign that she was no longer in God's favor. I took her directly to the Gospel of John where the disciples came upon a man born blind and asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" I told Donna that she was thinking just like the disciples were thinking, and that was normal and that was natural, but it was also mistaken, and when pain and stress and struggle become overwhelming, we automatically begin to conclude, just like the disciples did, that the fault has to lie with someone, and Donna was starting to think: "It's got to be me." Jesus gave the disciples an answer they had not anticipated and in answering the disciples, he gave us a working definition of what it means to glorify God. In John 9:3, it says: *Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of*

God might be displayed in him." Donna Tetter understood that definition of the glory of God. She understood that the works of God were being displayed in her, and she gave a living testimony to the words that Paul used to describe his own struggle in 2 Corinthians 4:16. This is what he said: *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

Anyone who knew Donna for any length of time knew that physically Donna's outer self was indeed wasting away. For years, she battled the disease that took her kidney, her leg, her finger and eventually her life. What the disease could not take away though was her determination in spite of the disease to glorify God with her life. There's a reason why Paul said, "We do not lose heart." He said this: *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.* I want to focus in on two words that Paul uses in this text that could easily raise eyebrows in most people who have ever struggled like Donna struggled with physical

affliction. Those two words are the words "light" and "momentary." The Greek word for "light" in this text means "easy." It means "lightweight." It actually means "trifling." We might use the phrase: "No big deal." The word "momentary" adds to the description of "lightweight," the idea that not only is this no big deal, but it's also only temporary, even momentary. Those sounds like fighting words at best to someone who was suffering. They sound like grossly insensitive words.

You know, Donna hated needles. And she was injected, transfused and infused so many times that most of her veins had collapsed. Does that seem like a lightweight thing? She was in pain nearly all of the time on one level, and when the pain became acute due to an amputation, she found that she couldn't take any pain medication without experiencing overwhelming nausea. So was the choice between tremendous pain and profound nausea an easy thing? She gradually lost her mobility, her independence and her personal freedom to the disease and perhaps worse, she was acutely aware of the strain that the disease had on her family. Was that a trifle? She suffered for 30 years with a disease that progressively robbed her of everything including her life. Lauren's adolescence and much of Jeff's career in law enforcement were shadowed for years by her disease, a disease that asserted itself every single day, for decades. That's momentary? This is light and momentary?

How can these words sound anything but cruel and thoughtless to anyone who suffered afflictions like Donna suffered. How could Paul even say such a thing? But we need to put Paul's words into context. We need to put them into the context that he spoke them in. We have to understand, first of all, that Paul lived a life of intense torment psychologically, spiritually and physically. Psychologically this is what he said in 2 Corinthians 1:8. He said: *For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*

Spiritually, Paul said this in 2 Corinthians 4:8, he said: *We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

And then physically. This is what Paul had to say about his physical condition in 2 Corinthians 11:24. He said: *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger, and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.*

In addition to this, Acts 28 tells us that after one of these shipwrecks, a cold and wet Paul goes up to a fire on the beach to warm himself, and a poisonous viper crawls out of the fire and bites him. Acts 28:3 says this, it says: *When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on a fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live."* We would call such a person literally snake bit. We would say this is a guy who can't win for losing. You know, Paul just says once I was stoned. Acts 14:19

describes it. It says: *But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.*

Question: What kind of a physical condition must you be in for your executioners to assume you've been stoned to death? What do you suppose Paul looked like at that moment? Paul never had the services of an emergency room or a plastic surgeon for that matter. I just wonder what Paul must have looked like having undergone what should have killed any other person. No doubt he carried the scars of that incident for the rest of his life. Lashed, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, and snake bit. This is the Paul who's describing his own physical pain as easy, lightweight, trifling. We might use the phrase "no big deal." And even if it was a big deal, according to Paul, it was only momentary.

It had been over 20 years of beatings, floggings, stonings and shipwrecks since Paul had met Jesus when he wrote 2 Corinthians and described his afflictions by saying, *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.* What gives? Well, you know, Paul wasn't being cruel or thoughtless. He was simply seeing one thing in comparison to something else and what made all of these afflictions seem light and momentary was the simple phrase "an eternal weight of glory."

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

So what is Paul getting at? Well, you know, I think that phrase "an eternal weight of glory," it sails right over most of our heads, and it does so because we seldom stop to think what kind of creatures we really are. We are the only creatures in this universe who bear the very image of their Creator, who will leave this life and enter immediately into the presence of the One for whom we were created, and in that moment we will realize what God meant when he said that our thoughts, our deeds, and even our idle words have eternal consequences, that they have weight, they have substance, they have gravitas. They have a weight of glory that Donna is now fully able to comprehend.

C.S. Lewis once said this, he said: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit."

See, Donna never understood how extraordinary she was. Did you notice that Paul in this text, he speaks of our light and momentary affliction as doing something in the ongoing present. Our light

and momentary affliction *is* preparing us, not was in the past, not will be in the future but is right here, right now in the present preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Do you know what that really means? That means that every single one of us has the opportunity to glorify God simply by acknowledging with our lives that we were created to walk the pathway he has already chosen for us, by freely choosing to walk in the works that he's already prepared beforehand for us.

Ephesians 2:10 says: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* It means we display the work of God in our lives in everything we do, from home, from work, from play, and especially from pain and suffering. Donna never fully realized it, but she excelled in displaying the work of God in her life, especially in pain and suffering. She understood on a gut level that these were the works that God had prepared for her beforehand that she should walk in them. There were many times when I saw Donna cry, at the pain in her life, at the fear that the pain had caused, at the trouble that she felt her disease presented to her family, but never once in all the years that I knew her did I ever hear Donna question God's goodness, his love or his faithfulness. If there was ever a problem between God and Donna, Donna saw it exclusively as her lack of understanding or trust, but not God's. She didn't

realize it at the time but she was preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Of all the tasks that she did, again, from writing birthday and get well cards to each church member for their encouragement -- remember that -- Donna wrote to all of you to encourage you. Of all the tasks that she did, the one that she valued most highly was that being one of our prayer warriors, and so once or twice a week, Donna would call with a prayer request or a question about someone she was praying for, and almost always it would be on a Tuesday or a Wednesday so that she could say, "Could you pray for this at the meeting on Wednesday night." She was preparing an eternal weight of glory. She didn't realize it but she was.

One of the qualities I so appreciated about Donna was that she was so easily entreated. You know, she might call in tears, weeping over some particularly difficult situation, and all I would have to do is simply point her back to the fact that she was a daughter of the King, that she was sent here with an incredibly difficult task, and God would honor her for that and that his grace would get her through it, no matter what that task entailed, and often times, the conversation that would begin in tears would end up with her cracking jokes, 'cause she was really only seeking some kind of assurance. She was also preparing an eternal weight of glory.

I would often call her with prayer requests, and she would be very vigilant to make sure that she had prayed through them thoroughly. We often talked about the old Chinese proverb that says "It's the nail that sticks up that gets pounded," and I told her, I said, "If you really want to be a prayer warrior, then you can expect that you are going to be that nail and the enemy is going to pound." She knew that. She expected that. And she was okay with that. She was preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. But make no mistake about it, Donna was a very real person. She couldn't walk on water and she never acted like she could. She had her own opinions on lots and lots of things and she was not shy at all about letting you know what those opinions were. I often pitied the poor guys that Lauren brought home for mom to check out. I think walking on water was only the preliminary test that she had for them. If they got through that, they got a second interview, but that was about it.

But you know, she got down and she got down a lot. She would get down on the fact that she was down, and I would tell her over and over again, I cannot imagine how I would handle the struggles that you've had to handle. But here's something else about Donna. She could just as easily bust out in a belly laugh with a grin that swallowed up her entire face and made her eyes just disappear. Again, she didn't realize it at the time but that grin and that

laughter coming from someone whose outer self was literally wasting away, it was preparing an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

And last week, none of us anticipated being in this service, speaking of Donna's homegoing one week later. It came as a shock to all of us but you know, looking back, I realized last week I said some things that I think God used to prophetically speak to the Tetter family. So allow me to repeat myself from some of the things I said last week. I said this, I said the God we worship left heaven itself to flawlessly live his life among us as a man. He went about doing good, preaching the kingdom of God, and to those to whom he brought the good news, he was crucified. There was never a greater crime or injustice ever committed than to take the life of the only flawless person who has ever lived. But you know, they never took the life of Jesus. Instead he freely gave it up. In John 10:17, he says: *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."*

You see, Jesus gave his life freely as payment for sin for every one of his sheep, and because he took the full punishment of my

sin, I now stand fully justified before God. And so today I can simply say that it was Donna last week who called me in tears, asking, "How can I find favor with God?" And like I said, I pointed her to the Gospel of John where the man born blind is revealed by Jesus as someone chosen by God to reveal his glory through his blindness. And I told her that if even Christ's disciples could get it wrong, then she, too, could easily forget that she had already found favor with God; that before the foundation of the world, God had chosen to fix his love on her. And that there was not one day in her entire life where she did not bask in that favor even though many days appeared otherwise. Even though her outer self was wasting away, her inner self was being renewed day by day. It was my privilege to remind her of that. I told her that she, too, had been called by God to reveal his glory through her steadfast clinging to his goodness when sickness and exhaustion tried to shout otherwise. I said, understand what God is trying to tell us here through Paul. You see, we all know that the judgment of God is perfect. We know that it searches out every single imperfection in our lives because it must, because it is a reflection of God's own perfection. So God tells us that every single word will come under his judgment, but we also know the opposite is true. God is equally committed to searching out every single momentary act of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, and self-control for his blessing:

"Well done, good and faithful servant." God even tells us in Mark 9:41: *"For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward."* Understand what that means to those of us who are already missing Donna. Psalm 56:8 says: *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?* God misses nothing. All things truly do work for an eternal good that we cannot see here on earth, but heaven sees it. And Donna is already being blessed with her struggles eternally. They have now become like Paul's, light and momentary. When God says: *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*, he is telling us that eternity in the kingdom of heaven is watching intently as each of us walk through the works he's prepared beforehand for us to walk in, and that every bit of affliction we suffer is producing for us a glory we cannot begin to understand and won't begin to enjoy until this life is over. Donna understands that perfectly today. Donna's tears were all captured in his bottle and she is way, way beyond resting in peace.

C.S. Lewis, let me conclude with, he captures the joy that is Donna's in this quote. This is what he says, he says: "And that is enough to raise your thoughts to what may happen when the redeemed soul, beyond all hope and nearly beyond belief, learns at

last that she has pleased Him whom she was created to please. There will be no room for vanity then. She will be free from the miserable illusion that it is her doing. With no taint of what we should now call self-approval, she will most innocently rejoice in the thing that God has made her to be." You can't ask for a better beginning than that. Let's pray.

Father God, we do lift up the life of Donna. We thank you for the privilege that you gave to her of a life that honors you, of a life that has been set aside for something that literally displays your work in her. Father God, I want to pray for Jeff, I want to pray for Lauren, I want to pray for the rest of the family. There's no disputing the ache that is coming, the ache that is here because we miss her. Father, help us to focus on the joy that she is experiencing right now as we go through this difficult time of adjustment, this difficult time of pain. Give us the grace to celebrate Donna's life while we mourn her loss, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.