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EMPTY HANDS

Interview with Pastor Rick Zweck

Pastor Rick Zweck was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease and passed away in 2016. We had the privilege of talking with him in 2013 about coming to terms with the disease and where he found hope.

Motor Neurone Disease gradually paralyses the muscles controlling hands, legs, speech and breathing. The cause isn't known, there's no cure, and life expectancy is an average of two to five years.

Here's Andy's interview with Rick

Rick, when did you realise that something wasn't quite right with your health?

One night Pastor Donald Auricht, our bishop, rang me and I was talking to him and I thought "I think I've had too much to drink!" because I was slurring my words, but I hadn't and so that was the first time I noticed that something was wrong. That was probably about 18 months ago. For a long time I hid it and said nothing to any one actually, not even my family at first.

Why did you keep quiet about it?

I was embarrassed because I really thought it was some form of anxiety and that was just an embarrassing thought for me, so yes, I kept quiet about it and I guess that made it worse because then I was always trying to hide this thing.

When did other people notice something was wrong?

Eventually, we went away to Europe, I had holidays and when I came back I obviously got worse while I was on holidays and some people after church came to me and said "um, Pastor Rick there's something wrong isn't there?" To my shame I denied it and then actually two seconds later I pulled that person back and said "I'm sorry I apologise. I know there is something wrong but I don't know what it is." and that was when I went to the neurologist and then I actually told the congregation there is some problem. I didn't know what it was at that stage but you know, people were wonderful. It was I guess that whole thing of being open and honest. It's such a freeing thing because I was no longer so stressed and my congregation, just like my family, have been just wonderful - praying for me and caring for me. When I talk about how God works through even the most terrible things, I've experienced, not just as a pastor but as a Christian, what it's like to belong to a community of faith - a supporting community that doesn't just walk by on the other side of the road but actually comes over and bandages your wounds and takes you to the inn.

After a series of tests you were eventually diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. How did you react when your specialist gave you the news?

at that moment my world just collapsed almost because I knew it was a possibility but really you don't think that it's going to happen to you. And so I went and told my wife, my wife was at school. She's a teacher and I rang my brother and sister and told them and we told our children and of course everyone was terribly distressed and for about a week we were just sort of in shock - really that's what it amounted to. The official line is that it's almost an instant death sentence but in fact, many people live for many years. My wife is actually the one up here who turned us all around and I guess we all started to try to think more positively about it. 3and I guess in the end you have to think ...well do I lay down and die or do I grasp at life and live? So the whole family sort of came to that conclusion after about a week. We just had to get in there and do what we can.

Have you been able to maintain a positive outlook since that time?

Look I can honestly say I've had. We've all had some down times and certainly there are times when it just strikes you and you wish you really didn't have this thing but at the same time I think we're managing to keep a very positive spirit and I can see God at work you know, even in this horrible diagnosis of Motor Neurone Disease. I love a quote by Pastor Helmut Thielike who was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the second world war and often he preached from bombed out churches you know, so the sermons are very powerful. And he talked about the blessing of empty hands and he writes sometimes we need the blessing of empty hands to understand the blessings that are in the Father's hands and I can honestly say that that's the truth for me. When you have Motor Neurone Disease there's really nowhere to go much, they don't know what causes it, they don't know how to cure it. And I guess that comes back to that quote about the blessings of empty hands. With Motor Neurone Disease you just have the blessing of empty hands in abundance, but you can also see then how God works with you and helps you

Rick, as a pastor, you've comforted other people facing terminal illnesses, how does it feel to be facing this for yourself now?

I suppose that as a pastor I've so often prayed for other people and to actually all of a sudden be on the receiving end has actually been quite humbling. It is humbling but it's also quite marvelous!

There was one time when you were particularly touched by a fellow pastor, can you tell us about that experience?

I do a lot of chapels at Pacific Lutheran College and I did one a few weeks ago and I was struggling a bit you know to just speak and afterwards I was just quite distressed because I've always loved doing chapel at the college with the primary school kids. You know, they are just so much fun and I thought here am I struggling to do this thing which I've done for so many years. I walked away from the chapel and the college chaplain came with me and all of a sudden it just happened. I just broke down in tears and I think I cried for about a quarter of an hour with just grief really. Anyway he just sat there with me that whole time and said not a word. If he'd spoken to me I think it would have almost been the wrong thing. He just sat there while I cried and that spoke the gospel to me more, almost than any words, although he did read from Take Thou My Hand And Lead Me. Some words from that "though oft it seems thou hidest thy wondrous might, yet me thou safely guidest through darkest night. Take then my hand and lead me till life is o'er. With heavenly manna feed me for evermore" and he said those words to me so, the silence combined with those words was probably some of the most wonderful pastoring and it still speaks to me. When I think about it I get quite teary even now

Why were the words of the hymn so meaningful?

It's just a beautiful picture that yes God does seem to hide his wondrous might at times and we wonder why, you know, why God, why me God? Why did I have to get this? You know... why me? And yet the hand is there holding you and guiding you through that darkest night and still leading you even so. I always think the genius of God is that when Satan does his worst and he's attacked my voice, which is probably one of the worst things he could do and yet God has shown me how much he's blessed me. I have a wonderful family, wonderful community. and he's given me this other ministry to do you know. Do your best Satan but you won't, you won't win! God has won and God will turn whatever you do into something good for his children.

Rick at this stage Motor Neurone Disease has affected mainly your speech and a little bit of your limbs. What's the future hold?

It's really just a matter of how fast or slow it happens. I know people often usually end up in wheel chairs, sometimes in nursing homes too. Eventually it affects your diaphragm so that you can't breathe. I have been told that apparently towards the end people sleep a lot and actually die quite peacefully but I'm not really sure. I don't look forward to that but I'm also not afraid of death you know. My great hero is Dietrich Bonhoeffer and I think his last words were something like "this is death, but for me the beginning of life" and as a Christian you have such a wonderful thing to look forward to. And I mean it doesn't take away all the fear and doesn't mean you're wanting to die or anything like that but it just means all the time when you're going through this, you have that call, and you know that God is with you and when the time comes you will go home to be with God. As a gift, what a wonderful thing!

Rick thanks for sharing with us today. In closing, do you have any encouragement for people listening who may be facing difficulties like yours?

That's a very hard question. Yeah, I'd just say never give up, never give up and never stop trusting God and his goodness even if at times God does not seem to be good and seems to have abandoned you. There's another text that I really love in the Old Testament in Isaiah. My favourite text "Even though a mother forgets her child I will not forget you. Your name is written on the palms of my hands".

God has put our name on his hands so never give up, your name is on God's hands and he hasn't forgotten you. He is with you and will help you each day at a time.

This is messages of Hope. One of Ricks favourite quotes was "We were made for God and our hearts will be restless until they rest in him."

In 2016 Rick went to rest with God. We thank him for his honesty and inspiring faith.