

Sue Ackerman Testimony

February 1, 2009

Thank you Pastor Gish for asking me to speak today, it is indeed a great privilege for me to stand before you all and share my testimony. It was only 6 months ago, I was connected to an oxygen tank and struggling to finish a sentence. Thank you to all of you at Hope Church who supported me and the family through your prayers, kindness and so many meals – we give you our deepest gratitude.

By the time I was 16 both my parents had passed away. My mom died after my dad and this second death hit me the hardest – I was deeply hurt and bitter. I began to wonder about God. I asked the typical questions. How could He allow this to happen...doesn't He know that we're just kids. Who was next? I didn't really have anyone to seek spiritual guidance from, so I decided if I lay low and didn't get into trouble, maybe there would be no more turmoil.

I moved to New York City from Montreal in my 20's, to pursue a career in fashion. It turned out to be a spiritual turning point as well. In that time God would meet with me through two wonderful Christian roommates and began my healing process. They took me to a bible study that taught me about Christian theology, something I had never heard before. I was introduced to the Westminster Confession, Calvinism; I read Martin Luther, St Augustine and C. S. Lewis. Most impactful was a Presbyterian church I attended, where it all gelled. It was as if God was laying a solid foundation for me in preparation for what was to come...

And what was to come has been a journey of privilege and crisis that would test and bless me in ways I never imagined.

It was also at the Presbyterian church I met my future husband Russ over the mini-muffins – and here is where the journey began. We married within 10 months and soon after we were off to Germany – Russ was chosen to develop his agency's operations in Eastern Europe. It was an exciting time after the Berlin wall had come down. We lived a fairytale life, we both pursued our careers, traveled across Europe, lived in a great apartment – we were blessed. And then a couple years later – boom - it all came to an abrupt end. Russ had taken a stand with his company, but corporate politics won out. We decided to return to NY without jobs or a home. For almost a year, we lived on cereal and a slice of pizza between us. Our tender marriage was tested, but through Christian counseling, was strengthened. The crisis turned out to be a blessing and a first step toward deepening my relationship with God.

I eventually found a job and joy of all joys, Adriana was born. I lost the job, Russ restarted his career but we had to move to Boston. We bought our first home and one week into it another joy of all joys, Alexander, was born; things were going well. But about a year later, the technology company Russ was working for closed its doors. But as one door closed, one door opened. As God would have it, what lay ahead was a great opportunity in London – God took care of us and provided, without any financial pain. It was a wonderful time, with Russ in a global marketing role he loved, we had an apartment near Kensington Palace living the expat life, and our children were thriving – once again we were blessed.

Then on a visit back to the States on Christmas Eve 1999, a lump popped up from under my collar bone. A biopsy was taken and as I lay in bed that night awaiting the outcome, I cried out to God and prayed for negative results. Within moments I felt as if Someone had entered the room, a calming comforting presence that stopped my crying and seemed to say that everything was going to be OK. I didn't know what that meant exactly. A day or so later, when the results came in positive, it hurt to hear, but I was able to accept it because of what I understood from His presence. So while everyone was celebrating the dawn of a new Millennium, we were dealing with the news that I had Hodgkins – a cancer of the immune system. We were told the cure rate was high – 90% – and had confidence that things would turn out well.

We returned to the UK where I was treated for six months. Following the chemo, we took a celebratory trip to Italy. We were so positive about the future. Then, the day after we returned, I discovered another lump and learned that the disease had come back with a vengeance – I was blindsided and in despair. Up until then, I thought that things were going well and if I'm honest, perhaps I had also gotten a bit too smug about beating this thing. I was humbled into the realization that neither I nor the doctors were, in fact, in control of this situation. This was all God. The next step, at this point, required high dose chemotherapy followed by a stem cell bone marrow transplant, with a survival rate of only 50%.

I returned to NY for treatment leaving my husband and children behind in the UK. Family took care of the children while Russ returned for 3 weeks to be with me while I was in the isolation unit during the transplant. There time stood still...This was now a life and death crisis. We were both confronted with the very real concern that I might not make it. We needed to give it all up to God, to accept His will whatever it was...

Thankfully, the stem cell transplant was successful and I was to follow up with radiotherapy several weeks later. I was so looking forward to going back to the UK to peacefully recover. But when Russ returned to the UK he learned that his company had decided to close their operations. He did not tell me this for 6 weeks as he was concerned about my recovery. For him, it felt like he was in a free fall plummeting to the ground. He had to

choose which country to live in, ensure transition of medical insurance from the UK, find a new home, a new job and move the family. Finally when he had to, as gently as he could told me the news, and by God's grace everything fell perfectly into place after that. A wonderful new position fell into Russ's lap, we found a home in Wilton and in the interim, were given a townhouse, no less, to stay in NY. God had provided us everything we needed...

The experience had given us a far greater understanding of who he is with a deeper respect for and reliance on His timing – it had helped us to trust God and turn everything over to Him.

In Wilton, things were stable and good again and we had high hopes...but the dry cough that started after treatment just wouldn't go away. We were so weary from the onslaught of issues and so deeply desiring calm and normality, we couldn't bear dealing with any other medical issues. But I had developed a rare case of pulmonary fibrosis from the combination of the chemo and radiation for my cancer – and the disease's progression after a couple of years made it impossible to be normal. This disease scarred my lungs and caused an irreversible loss of my lungs ability to transfer oxygen – with no effective treatments.

Over the four years since I had been diagnosed, I could accomplish less and less. I had to stop a small home accessory business I had begun, I could no longer read to the kids, I had to enlist them to do more tasks. It had come to a point where I couldn't laugh and I couldn't cry, only smile and shed tears. Toward the end, I was on oxygen 24/7 and pushed myself everyday to do whatever I could. A disease like this affects the whole family and I am blessed to have such a wonderful husband and children who kept the home running when I couldn't.

I'll never forget the day my doctor said I would have to have a lung transplant – this was the most shocking and crushing news. I had gone from a curable disease to an incurable disease to a type of transplant that I didn't even know existed. I found myself relating to the Biblical woman who was sick for 12 years and made her way through the crowd to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak to be healed – except I was pulling on it. I so desperately did not want to go through a transplant. But as always, God provides when we are unable. About the time last year when my family and I couldn't cope anymore with the day to day activities, my family and friends, and Hope Church all stepped in to lend a helping hand; God literally poured His love through your generosity.

And I was overwhelmed when I came to realize that Christ had literally experienced my suffering in His crucifixion. His outstretched arms pulled his chest cavity apart, collapsing His lungs and leaving him to suffocate to death, which is precisely what pulmonary fibrosis is – a slow suffocation. So He not only substituted himself for me, but died my kind of death.

Then in July of 2008, on the fourth call, I received my new lungs. But someone had to die in order for me to live a new life... That sacrificial act was strikingly similar to what Christ has done for us and has profoundly humbled me.

Once again the crisis has reaped deep blessings in my relationship with God. The post transplant experience has been an amazing time – it is the gift of a clock turned back and the opportunity to live the life you would live now that you can. I had been lifted from the depth of endless trial and struggle and placed onto a mountaintop. I would lie in bed each night with an indescribable joy and intense gratitude and feel the Father's embrace. I was in awe of His Majesty and His beauty. It felt like home – a place where there are no tears, or mourning, or illness or disease. The transplant restored my body and I compare it to God's restoration of heaven and earth, making things right again, as they were originally intended to be.

I have come to realize that things like perseverance, victory, courage, grace, strength, peace, love, life are not in fact things...they are actually Christ. I have none of these but through Christ. Being a Christian is a life of overcoming through Him.

I now have a desire to worship Him more and focus less on me and my comfort. Is this not why, after all, we were created, to love and worship God? Have I been worshipping God for who He is, not what He has done for me? This is now my focus. I must confess it has been frustrating because the last few months have been interrupted with infections and complications, distracting me from this goal.

So the journey continues, with the gospel more firmly embedded into my heart as I work it in and live it out. The transplant has been a miraculous blessing giving me new life for which I will forever be thankful to God.

I hope I have honored God through my testimony today. Russ, my rock, I love you; Adriana, Alexander I love you and this testimony is really for you...remember whatever happens, be faithful and obedient to Christ, He is your God who loves and cherishes you more than you know. He will delight, galvanize and console you – hold tightly onto Him.

Thank you.