



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

October 14, 2007

Thank you, God by Rev. Donna Barr

I was on call...which meant that I was the only Chaplain on duty during a 16 hr. shift at the University Medical Center. This was my regular weekly duty during my two years of training in hospital chaplaincy. I would arrive at 4:00 in the afternoon and leave the following morning around 9:00 after reporting to the permeate staff all the calls I had made during the night. I had my two regular areas to cover, but I also carried a beeper so that if any emergency, trauma, or death occurred, I could be reached immediately. I arrived and went straight to I.C.U to visit my regular patients and families. They were holding on....some had been there literally for weeks keeping close to their loved one. Then on down the hall to the Burn Unit where a firefighter was holding on to life after many sacrificing hours of containing forest fires in Eastern Kentucky. These were busy nights...on call.

I had just finished dinner when the beeper sounded. As always, my heart picked up its beating as I knew that someone was in serious need. I walked to the nearest phone answering the call. It was from Pediatric I.C.U. Baby Ashley was near death. As I walked toward the elevator, I prayed as I always did that God would be with this family and this child...that he would slow me down so that I could hear and see their needs....that I would be gentle and not one word would come from my mouth that sounded harsh next to their already broken, suffering, and wounded hearts.

God had called me some 20 years before this moment in time. He had called me to share my life with him and especially with others in just this kind of situation. I called it then and now a new life in grace. Believe me, very emergency call I've made has been possible only by God's Grace.

In talking to Baby Ashley's nurse, I received the medical status of this precious 8 month old baby girl. She had a strep infection which had invaded her blood stream. Antibiotics were not working fast enough....There was no hope. The young parents and both sets of grandparents were in a private room waiting for me to come. The parents, grandparents and I cried as we talked and prayed for this young life. We held a Baptism with Ashley's nurses in attendance all forming a hand held circle around her small little bed. I stayed with them about 3 hours. I wanted to stay with them until the end but knew that there were many others to minister to this night. I hugged the parents feeling like a family member as we had shared this deep emotional time together. I told them I would be on call all night and for them to page me again if they needed me.

That night turned into one call after another...gun shot wounds, attempted suicide, spinal cord injury...only to mention a few. Before I knew it was 2:00 a.m. and I climbed into my cubicle bunk bed reserved for the on-call chaplain. Sleep overtook me immediately...another gift from God. The next morning I left the hospital not even remembering Baby Ashley as so many other things had happened afterward. But in my car on the way home, each of the families' faces surfaced before me, and I prayed for their strength and courage in the face of death.

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As Paul Harvey would say...Now here's the rest of the story.

About 3 months later, I was walking down the main corridor of the Medical Center when I heard a voice shout, "Chaplain Barr, Chaplain Barr!" I turned around and saw a young woman running to greet me. I had no immediate recollection of the woman. She introduced herself to me, realizing that I was blank. "I'm Amy," she said, "Remember me?"

"I'm Ashley's mom." I felt so badly that I had forgotten her and then the pain and sorrow of that night returned to my heart. Just as I was beginning to express my sympathy to her, she blurted out, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the elevator. "You've got to come see our Ashley. She's up in I.C.U. The doctors found out why she had the infection...it was because of a heart defect. She is here to have it repaired. She was talking so fast I couldn't take it all in...Was I really on the elevator going to see Ashley? We walked into I.C.U. and there sat Ashley smiling as we approached her. I had never forgotten her beautiful face, but this time it was all pink and healthy looking. Just three months earlier, I had baptized an ashen-grey little baby fighting for every breath she took. Her mother picked her up and handed her to me. I was so shaken I had to sit. As I sat and rocked Ashley, tears of joy filled me. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. To me, she was literally raised from the dead. Through my tears, I laughed at my own ignorance and disbelief. Jesus' words spoke to me clearly, "O, ye of little faith." As I was about to leave Amy looked at me and said, "Chaplain Barr, this surely is God's Amazing Grace."

Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem and ten lepers beg for mercy. He hears their cry and sends them to follow the correct law - "go and show yourselves to the priests." On their way they are made clean. Every last one of them. One, recognizing that this has happened, turns back, praising God and thanking Jesus. Something different has happened to this one. He not only sees that he is healed but he recognizes the source. The sight and recognition are every bit as much a gift as the healing itself. Jesus saw and had mercy, now the one who has received mercy turns back toward Jesus, falls at his feet and gives thanks.

This Gospel story reminded me of a young mother's eagerness to tell and show me the grace of God. As Amy pulled me along to the ICU she was filled with gratitude and thanks for God's mercy. It also reminds me of how often we fall short of giving thanks as did the remaining nine lepers. Grabbing our gifts from God and taking them for granted expecting the outcomes of our requests to be given to us and experiencing grace without even a thank you. Again and again, I realize the impact of my own stories of grace that must be told and shared.

These stories are not always ones that have perfect endings but always teach me about God's goodness and grace. These gifts of grace invoke, elicit, even demand, a response. Not because it is the proper thing I ought to do, but because, in the face of it I can do nothing else. This is how I knew I had to devote my life to

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ministry. My own experiences with illness, suffering and pain was so overwhelming, so life changing, that it had to be shared.

I'm not surprised that this Gospel falls right in the middle of what we call stewardship - our considerations about giving back to our community of faith. Which one of us having found the lost coin, the lost treasure, the lost son, the lost sheep would not want to tell our neighbor? Which one of us at St. John's would not want to share the good news that God's grace has sustained us in these difficult times of our diocese? In fact, one of us did say thank you in The Lexington Herald Leader this weekend.. Our own Vickie Duff in an article of gratitude for Fr. Alan's ministry here at St. John's.

Which one of us can do nothing else but to say thank you. Jesus saw the lepers and they were healed. One of them responded with praise and thanks. There was nothing else he could do. The great mystic and theologian Meister Eckert says "When you think you need to pray.....Thank You.....is all you need to say." Soon enough, we, with faith the size of a mustard seed and basket full of burdens and doubts, we, who in a moment will share a meal with the Lord Jesus, the one in whom the kingdom of God is present among us, having been assured by grace that our faith has made us well, will be called to get up and serve, to reach in and give, and to say our thank you. We have received gifts we neither deserve nor understand. It invokes, elicits, and demands our response. What else can we do?

Amen

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