R*eflections*

Be not afraid

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The day after Christmas I traveled across the country to visit a family member who is battling cancer. I'd entered the scene before: the hospital bed is in the living room. The family members are standing, sitting, or bustling around taking care of every need. The oxygen tank is hooked up to the patient's nose through a plastic tube, and the patient is weak and unable to sit up for long stretches. The patient might as well be bald for all the cover offered by the short-cropped gray hair.

I'd seen this room dozens of times before, but the family was always someone else's family, and the patient was always someone else's loved one. I'd done my CPE training in an intensive care unit, and I'd

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served for a year as a hospice chaplain. I'd walked into rooms like this before, and I'd left rooms like this one, too—left them much the same as I'd leave this time: with the family tearful and grateful beyond words for my visit, with a patient holding my hand, not wanting to let go. This time, however, I wasn't the chaplain; I was family. I wasn't the minister or the preacher or the reverend, or any of the other things hospice families had called me. This time I was a sibling who had traveled across more than a few states to hug family, hold my own kin's hand, and share in making the tears as well as helping dry them.

While I was a hospice chaplain, many people asked me if it was depressing work. I had to answer in all honesty that it wasn't. It was difficult—dealing with death is not easy—but it wasn't depressing. I saw too much love for it to be depressing.

Although there were times when I witnessed the pain and anguish that dysfunctions, addictions, and abuses of all types can wreak on families and individuals, more often than not I also witnessed the immense power of love in helping people overcome the pain of illness and the emotional pain created within families. I saw firsthand the joy of reconciliation, both of people with God and of people with each other, too many times to call my work depressing.

Working as a hospice chaplain, I was granted the great honor and gift of ministering to people and families through their times of suffering and pain, both physical and emotional, as patients and their families came to terms with death and dying, loss and grief. As is the case with most ministries, I also received much in the way of blessings from those individuals and families with whom I walked in a

patient's last days. The people I encountered taught me much about love and the need for a family, a group of people who will love you and take care of you until death. It may be your biological family, or it may not.

I developed a deep love of the twenty-third psalm. I must have prayed it a hundred times, with people who believed it to be the literal word of God, people who weren't sure, and people who asked for it because it was the only religious thing they could think of in their hour of need. Its everlasting power, for me, is in its expression of fearlessness: "Even though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

I don't fear death and illness anymore. When I walked into that living room after Christmas and the patient was a member of my family, I was sad, and there were a lot of emotions—but fear was not one of them. "Cancer, death—you guys have no power here," I remember thinking. "I've seen you guys up close. There's nothing new for you to show me here." Being able to bring that courage to my own family is a gift, a gift from God and from all the patients and families and nurses and social workers and volunteers with whom I worked in hospice. I don't know what cancer will bring to my family, and we may yet have a lot to go through; I'm not sure what will happen. There's only one thing I'm sure of: I'm not afraid.