

Matthew 4:1-11
2/10/2008

As many of you know, I was a chaplain in a hospital located in Oklahoma City for a year before I went to seminary. I was assigned to many units, including a Cardiac Care Unit with patients going in for procedures such as angio-grams and by-pass surgeries. During my second week on the job, as I walked through my unit, there were echoing, twangy, drawled voices bellowing from a patient's room, perhaps not so unusual for Oklahoma. But there was also another sound emerging from this room that was, that of a well-played, well-oiled and saliva-ed harmonica. Someone in that room gummed and played the harmonica at light speed and at a loud volume, to the point that everyone on the floor was wheeled to or standing in the hall and was either endeared to or irritated by this harsh harmonical sound. It seemed like a hospital hoe-down. Westchester Medical has nothing on the Oklahoma City Columbia Presbyterian. I knocked on the door, but no one heard. Did I mention that the television was also on, with Bob Barker telling people to "come on down?" I entered the room, and there was the stereotypical rugged, rural family, sans moonshine. Girls still in mid-teens with babies on their hips. Simple dress, country manners, and the patient, Mr. Richardson, in his hospital bed, wearing overalls without a shirt. I introduced myself, and they were excited to see a chaplain. Mr. Richardson turned down the volume on the *Price is Right*, quieted everyone who was speaking and told me that they had found some blockage in his heart and were doing angioplasty. "My heart's broken, Reverend, and they're fixin' to fix it tomorra." I said I was sorry to hear that. I mumbled a heart-felt prayer. And the next morning, I checked in on Mrs. Richardson, Louisa. Everything went perfectly, and I expected to never see them, or that blamed harmonica, again.

But several months later, the same cacophony of sounds could be heard throughout the unit. I went to the room, and found out that Mr. Richardson needed, "a tune up" as he called it. I checked in on them each day, and again, things went smoothly. By this time, I had become one of the family. I had even watched the *Price is Right* a time or two in their room. "Have your pets spayed and neutered."

Then, months later, two days before Christmas, my pager started beeping. I called the number and reported to my unit. Someone had gone into cardiac arrest during a routine angiogram. I rushed to meet the family, but there were doctors surrounding them. I asserted my way in, and I realized that Mr. Richardson and his whole family were standing there, talking about his wife Louisa. There were no loud noises, or even a harmonica. Instead, there were lowered family faces and shock. The physicians were laying out the options. They could operate on Mrs. Richardson, but even with a quadruple bypass, she had only a 2-3 percent chance of survival. The only other option was to make her comfortable and allow her to die. The family saw me, and Mr. Richardson said to the doctor, "Sir, we need to talk with our chaplain." I ushered us all into a family waiting room. We prayed quickly, knowing that time was of the essence, and then we spoke. They shared what Louisa would have wanted. We talked about death, that it was ok to die, that God's love would see them through. And the family said that Louisa would not have wanted to be in pain, that she would have wanted to simply go. They all seemed decided and in agreement when there was a knock on the door. The physician came in and was annoyed with the decision. He lectured them, "You know, death is the enemy here. We have to work against

it. There is no other hope” He spoke at them as though there were a manifest destiny to operate, and that if they didn’t, they did not love Louisa. The family moved from faith to fear. And they opted for a “Quadruple bypass.” I could not help but understand. Losing someone you love is tough.

Today, for the first Sunday/weekend in Lent, I want to talk about my experience with the Richardsons, and I want to talk about how we approach death, a light Lenten topic. But I do not want to do so out of morbid curiosity. Instead, I feel an odd responsibility to respond to Paul’s Letter to the Romans, our New Testament reading from this morning/evening in light of my experience in that hospital. And I believe that part of Lent has to do with approaching death and ashes and things that we have done and left undone, knowing that they are not the final word. In other words, to prepare for resurrection, we have to understand what we are being resurrected from.

From the portion of Romans we hear, “death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” That is what we read in our Bibles, and what makes me want to respond. For Paul seems to be saying that death is the result of turning away from God, a punishment from the time of Eden. If that is the case, he seems to be agreeing with that physician that death is the enemy. And I do not agree with either one. But in fact, our translation is a bad one. At least according to Paul Neuterline, there is a better, alternate translation of those words, a translation that the whole Eastern branch of Christianity purports. They believe that this text should read that instead of death being a result of sin, that sin is a result of death. Sin is the result of death. Or to put it another way, we often turn away from God because we are afraid of not having enough, enough money, enough love, enough life, which brings me to the Richardsons. Although they were certainly not sinning in their decision to operate, we can easily see that their decision was understandably motivated by just that fear, the fear of death, the fear of mortality and finiteness and letting go. They even went against what Louisa wanted as a result. And this is why I want to talk about death today, because the very fact of the finiteness of life, often makes us turn away from God.

In the Gospel reading, we see Jesus come dangerously close to sinning, or if I apply what I just said, Jesus comes dangerously close to fearing death and his finiteness. And it is a situation in which I imagine that we would all be sympathetic, perhaps even praise him, if he did sin and did respond to fear. Wouldn’t it be great to have Jesus rule the world, turning rocks into bread, and flying all around, even on top of the Temple. There would be no scarcity at all, and that would be wonderful! And yet, Jesus refuses. And the reason that I believe that he refuses is this: Jesus never makes decisions based on the fear of “not enough.” He understands that whatever he has is a gift, and that there is never too little of the most important stuff, God’s love. And so Jesus refuses easy answers to complex problems. He refuses to be magical. He wants to build a caring relationship with us and God, one in which we give bread to the world together, instead of rushing to a fear-based finish line. It is the same stance that Jesus takes toward his own death. He continues to believe in the peace and forgiveness of God, against all evidence, and that gives him life and abundance.

On Christmas Eve, Mrs. Richardson lay in the ICU, machines beeping, vents blowing. She had not been awake since the surgery. She was not expected to live. I checked in on them routinely. And at ten o'clock on Christmas Eve, I went to the room to say some prayers and give what comfort I could. I expected sallow, sinking faces. But instead, as I approached, I heard that harmonica, playing Christmas carols, and a family singing along in slight, twangy voices. They invited me to join them. And we sang out in faith, holding hands. We knew that this would be their last Christmas together on this planet. But still, we sang in hope. We trusted in God, and the abundance of God's love. They were no longer fearful of even death or of saying goodbye. They had become models of Jesus' love. We thanked God for Louisa, and they let her go.

During Lent, we are invited to explore the deaths of our lives, the ashes, the things that we are afraid of, the places we feel scarcity, where we feel a void. And we explore those fears because our fears, our senses are scarcity, are the most likely places in ourselves where we will turn away from God. But we are invited to do so, not to judge ourselves harshly, or cause more pain, or feel more scarcity. We are invited to do so because we trust that those feelings, those places in ourselves are not the final word. The ultimate end of the story is coming, and in the end, God's love redeems us all, and transcends all scarcities. We can look at, accept death, sin, pain, and problems, because we know that in the end only God's life-giving, resurrecting peace will remain.