

BEING THERE
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March 30, 2014
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 23

You, O Lord, are my shepherd,
I shall not want.
You make me lie down in green pastures;
you lead me beside still waters;
you restore my soul.
You lead me in right paths
for your name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in your house forever.

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As most of you know, my mother-in-law, Betty Egan, died just two weeks ago. Through her final days I re-learned—as though for the first time—an important lesson or two. I'd like to share those with you in case you should face a similar situation.

Being Betty's son-in-law was easy. Being her pastor was not so easy. It's not like I could put on one hat and then another. The lines blurred.

For example, trying to get her to talk about end of life issues was a *family* concern as much as a *pastoral* concern. Over many years, Paula and I tried repeatedly to get her to discuss end of life matters so we could know and honor her wishes.

But she refused to discuss such things, in part because she always thought it just wasn't a good time. It was always too soon. Even two years ago at age 86, she thought it was too soon. After all, having been hale and hearty for 86 years, she was convinced she'd live to be 100.

Her attitude was: *let's talk about such things when I'm 95. That will be soon enough.*

We thought she should accept mortality humbly and gracefully *like all old people are supposed to do!* But she had a different approach. You might call it denial but you could also call it stubborn determination.

For example, she was the only one who believed that if only she could get to Johns Hopkins for a weeklong regimen of experimental chemotherapy she might be cured. As that became less likely her frustration mounted to the point of desperation. And that's when she blurted out to me one evening as we were talking on the phone.

Aren't you my pastor?

Yes, I am.

Well, don't you have a prayer for healing?

Yes, I do.

Well, then, bring it up here!

I said I would. And I told her I'd also bring a vial of oil and my pastoral stole.

And so it was that Paula, Barry (Betty's son) and I sat with Betty in her Homewood apartment Sunday afternoon, Feb. 23. I put my stole around my neck and told her this would be a "prayer for healing" and not "last rites" because Presbyterian ministers don't do last rites, *and me especially*.

I told her about the two times I had faked last rites to pacify a troubled family who had insisted on last rites for a dying loved one. In both cases the dying person did not die as expected. In fact, one is still living—20 years later—in So. Carolina. I told Betty that I'm just not good at last rites! To which she replied with a laugh, *please, do last rites for me*.

I didn't. But I did say this: *In life and death we belong to God*. Then we recited the 23rd Psalm together. She didn't miss a word.

I anointed her head, hands and feet with oil. I offered a prayer of thanksgiving for her life, for her parents and her children. I asked forgiveness for her sins and courage to face whatever might befall her. I offered a blessing for her children, grand children and great grandchildren. Then we recited the Lord's Prayer. She didn't miss a word.

And finally this: *with believers in all times and places, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. I kissed her forehead and took off my stole.

Her legs were still swollen. The tumor in her abdomen still bulged. Her complexion was still pasty. But something had changed. For the first time, she was ready to talk about death and dying without fear or anger.

Grace had arrived on the wings of a dove.

It wasn't the words, the oil or the stole that did it. It was a mystical presence beyond words, gestures and personalities. It was the presence of a loving Spirit that speaks words of wisdom in the darkest night: *Let it be. Let it be. Let there be light*.

And there was light.

Fear vanished. Courage arose. Something broken had been made whole.

And that is a lesson we must learn over and over. There is not always a cure. But there is always care. And just being there for others is often enough whether they are dying or simply in a rough patch.

No, we can't be there for every ailing soul we know. We can't be there all the time. But we can be there for some of the time. There's no rule—just the rule of love. Listen to your heart and your heart will let you know.

I've seen this kind of care more than once; and I'm guessing you have too. When others are down and out, feeling badly or facing death, people show up as though directed by an invisible hand.

Some fluff the pillow and adjust the mattress. Some set flowers by the bed. Some tell stories that make us laugh, or sing a song, or show us photos.

You lead me beside still waters. You make me lie down in green pastures. You restore my soul, which is to say: you get my mojo back.

Some help us stand when we're wobbly. Some help us walk when our legs are weak. Some bring meals, load up the fork, or hold a cup to our parched lips. Some mop our brows or massage oil into our dry, crackly skin.

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemy. You lead me in right paths. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Some just sit. Some just sit and hold our hand until we've made it through the fearsome valley of the shadow of death. For you see, there's no way round that valley. We all must go through—sometimes more than once. And the best way through, as it turns out, is with a companion. Companion, which actually means: *one with whom we break bread.*

Sometimes we're the sheep. Sometimes we're the shepherd. Sometimes we receive. Sometimes we give. It all depends.

You don't have to bring a cure. You don't have to speak words of great wisdom. You don't have to light up the night.

Healing is not up to us. Being there is.

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Hymn: "Healer of Our Every Ill"