

Caring for Shut-ins

Rev. Timothy Pauls

"My grandfather fought in the war."

She sits dignified in her wheelchair, hymnal held in transparent, blue-veined hands. Emma's eyes are a piercing blue as she glances at me. For a moment, I've been turned from pastor to pupil. I'm at the care center to give her Holy Communion. We've worked our way through the service from the Invocation to a brief sermon. Not all shut-ins possess the energy for the entire liturgy, but Emma is alert as ever.

The United States has just invaded Iraq in the wake of September 11, and I've talked about war as part of the wages of sin and the certainty of Christ in a violent world. Worship services with shut-ins often involve some give-and-take that isn't a part of public worship, and she speaks as my little sermon concludes.

"My grandfather fought in the war." She's staring into the past now, sorting through memories to give me the accurate details. After a moment, she continues, "He told me stories. He was a soldier in the infantry. When the battle started, they charged out of the woods and into the field. He doesn't know what happened next, but when he woke up, there were many bodies on the ground." She hesitates for the right words. She always speaks deliberately. "He started wandering around, trying to find someone else alive, and finally found another soldier." Another pause. "They spoke a little while, made sure that each other was okay. They figured out where the armies were." She's standing with them in her mind, the three of them getting their bearings. "Then they went their separate ways. They were on opposite sides. The other man was wearing blue, and my grandfather wore gray."

Blue and gray. Emma is ninety-eight. Her grandfather fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. That's far enough from my life that it's just a story in history books. But in a care center in Boise, Idaho, there's a woman who sat on her grand-dad's lap and heard firsthand stories of the War between the States.

She breaks her reverie and smiles apologetically. "I'm sorry. Where are we?"

We're at the liturgy for Holy Communion. We quietly sing the Sanctus and pray the Lord's Prayer. Then I speak the Words of Institution: "Take and eat, this is My body, which is given for you."

For you, Emma, for you.

Our culture glorifies youth and tries to forget about aging. There are doubtless many reasons for this, but one is that aging leads to death, and the world wants to ignore the remorseless enemy that shadows all their days. So the world would rather watch the young and ignore the elderly. The results are tragic: our society has amnesia as it refuses to listen to those who have left us this place for our inheritance.

Pastors and congregations can be tempted to ignore the elderly, but it is for different reasons. Concerned by declining numbers and loss of congregational leaders, many are tempted to focus on gaining newer, younger members at the expense of older members who consume time and effort without offering much in return. But Luther once noted that, as long as we are on this earth, we are God's instruments. Sometimes, we are active instruments whom God uses to serve others. Sometimes, we are passive instruments whom God uses to teach others how to serve. Emma has summed this up more than once as she adjusts to the amputation of her leg: "Pastor, I'm ready to go. But as long as the Lord wants me here, I'm willing to stay."

Emma is the Lord's instrument at that care center for His purposes, and for all I know, His purpose is to teach her pastor more about His faithfulness to His people. When Christ died for the world, He died for Emma. She knows this because, generations ago, He said, "Emma, I baptize you." Even now He says through a pastor's mouth, "I forgive you all of your sins," and "This is My body, given for you." So I have the pleasure of telling Emma that even if everyone else should forget her, Jesus does not.

A few months from now, I will preach at her funeral. The text will be Philippians 1:21-23: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." Far better indeed. But until then, Christ is not far away. No matter age or disability, He is as near to His people as His Word and Sacraments, and not one of them will be forgotten.

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