

Dear Brothers and Sisters of AZ Mission Center,

I admit that in some things, I've proved to be a slow learner and even though I preached the importance of the ministry of presence, I had never personally embraced its power, until I found myself in a dark and uncertain time.

The lesson started in 2014 in the waiting room of the clinic where I waited for Brian to finish a procedure. He had developed symptoms that put him on the doctor's radar and I churned in the chair, trying not to cry as I imagined the worst. That's when Frankie, a friend from church and nurse in the clinic, walked out and sat down next to me. I didn't believe her, but she said her latex allergy had prompted her to leave early that day. And, as I babbled my concerns, she sat, fully aware of my anxiety, listening and shouldering my fears with me. In my darkness, she brought me a quiet comfort.

Days later, the oncologist sat across from us in the small exam room. I recall it in slow motion as the doctor shared that Brian's type of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma was very aggressive. Survival would be dependent on his response to chemotherapy, but it was a potent cocktail of toxic drugs and he would need to tolerate the treatment to beat the disease. I asked one of the doctors what I should do. His first response was to keep working as the drugs could be very costly. Okay. I would do that. But I would also need to be hyper-vigilant to prevent exposures to illnesses, and as a middle school teacher, keeping bugs out of the house was always tricky. There would also be dietary considerations for a while. Certain foods were prohibited, and public outings would be restricted. We had gotten used to frequent meals out but they could prove dangerous to Brian's success now, so I returned to cooking all of our meals.

I remember sitting on the side of the road with a friend and falling apart. She heard me wail about what I couldn't do, couldn't manage, couldn't face. Carol sat, listened and then offered a powerful prayer of liberation from all of the things that were immobilizing me. She was present in my darkness, and it was a profound comfort.

The good news is that while Brian met many challenges in the months that followed, he powered through and his body was winning the battle. Because of an early setback and the treatment protocol, he got the news that one last additional full round of chemo had been scheduled...for Christmas Day. Really?? But, he was only moderately annoyed. He was feeling very emboldened, and boasted that while folks would be up that morning, unwrapping gifts, he would be wrapping up this whole business. He was pumped.

We arrived at the clinic just before 8 a.m. Christmas morning, and noted the handful of cars in the lot. I didn't often go with Brian for the hours of infusions he had previously experienced, but this morning we had assembled a tray of treats for the staff that had pulled holiday duty and prepared to pass the next few hours with several rounds of Sequence. So, it was quite the surprise when we entered the front lobby to find the Johnson family from church, decked out in holiday hats, goody tray in hand for the nurses. It was another expression of the Good Spirit through the ministry of presence. We were blessed by their love and thoughtful comfort.

As you can imagine, Brian's and my experiences with his illness were quite different, quite personal and the lessons are still unfolding. Even if a long time in coming, one thing I truly understand is that Christ met us in a dark time and place through the presence of others. It was powerfully transformative to know that while none of them could take away the difficulties, they would not allow us to face them alone.

Sometimes we need someone to sit in the waiting room with us, listen through the tears on the side of the road, or greet us in the lobby on Christmas morning. That was my need. Others may need a shared meal, a friend in the courtroom, or a nonjudgmental ear.

Because life can be hard, it is important to remember we are called to be with each other, to bring light, comfort and hope into the dark places and times in one another's lives. It is engaging in relationship where we encounter the living Christ. It took a dark time in my life to really understand the power of being present.

The Christmas message from 2000 years ago that is still calling to us today: Immanuel, our God is with us.

May this Christmas bring a new awareness of your power in being present.

Your sister in Christ,
Sara Tubbesing

