

2/17/2019

To you, O God, we lift up our souls. To you we offer our praise and prayer, our worship and thanksgiving, even our very lives. Make your ways known to us. Show us the path on which we should walk. Lead us in your truth and teach us. For you alone are the God who saves, the God in whom we trust; and the One on whom we wait. **Amen.**

I found that one of the most difficult conversations that I could have with a patient was when he or she should consider going into Hospice. Most people know that entering Hospice means that death is imminent within 6 months. Deep down, I think that most of the time, this news is not unexpected. Despite knowing this, many times, neither the patient nor the family is ready to agree to Hospice, even though it would open the door to an influx of additional services that they would not otherwise receive or be able to afford. Admitting that one has 6 months or less to live is traumatic and devastating. Unfortunately, many wait until it is too late to take advantage of what Hospice has to offer. It is also unfortunate that there are those who take advantage of the system and those who commit outright fraud. Healthcare providers must state that the patient will live less than 6 months and although this is not an easy assessment, most providers do the best that they can.

Two years ago, an owner of home health care and hospice companies in the Detroit area, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud. On March 15 and March 18, 2016, respectively, two other owners of the company, each pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud. Then in March 2016, two physicians from Troy and Flushing Michigan, also pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and wire fraud. According to admissions made as part of their guilty pleas, the owners paid kickbacks, bribes and other inducements to two area physicians, as well as to marketers and patient recruiters, for beneficiary referrals to companies they owned, including A Plus Hospice and Palliative Care, At Home Hospice and At Home Network Inc. They admitted that they would then bill Medicare for home care and hospice services that were often medically unnecessary and not provided.

Some of the victims were not terminal and even worse; some did not have a terminal diagnosis at all.

The US Department of Justice states that: "Since its inception in March 2007, the Medicare Fraud Strike Force, now operating in nine cities across the country, has charged nearly 2,000 defendants who have collectively billed the Medicare program for more than \$6 billion. In addition, the HHS Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, working in conjunction with the HHS-OIG (Office of Inspector General), are taking steps to increase accountability and decrease the presence of fraudulent providers."

Although necessary, this increased vigilance has led to some unfortunate scrutiny to individual patients.

Several years ago, six ominous letters were delivered to people in the area around Plattsburgh, New York. Under the bold title "Medicare Fraud Investigations," the United Government Services warned recipients that they were under scrutiny for cheating the government. The upshot: Each of them might owe the U.S. government tens of thousands of dollars. So, who were these hardened criminals? Hospice patients who had beaten the odds? Their crime: living longer than anyone expected and continuing to draw Medicare reimbursement of \$88 a day.

One suspect was Rosie DesParois, an 87-year-old who had entered hospice with advanced breast and endometrial cancer and was still alive four years later. Another was Beatrice Bates, admitted at age 89 with a whole host of problems, including the suffering of a heart attack during radiation therapy for cancer. Still, she survived for five more years.

Had these women committed a heinous crime? Hardly. And yet, the taxpayers' money must be protected, so Medicare is cracking down. Their policy is that the terminally ill who don't die within six months risk losing coverage.

I still believe that Hospice is a very good thing when the time comes. However as Christians, we often pray for a miracle of healing for those at this very fragile time of their lives, while at the same time preparing them for what comes next. This can be an uncomfortable place to be. How do we deal with final plans, yet continue to live fully, both now and in the next life to come? Paul tackles this question directly and so does Jesus, although not so directly. While hospice is concerned about the dignity of human existence at the end of life, no matter what follows, Paul's focus is on eternal life. If we have the hope that physical death is but a portal to another level of existence, our earthly lives should be radically transformed. Let's face it, we can choose to focus on the reality that we have all been dying since birth, *which feels kind of depressing*. Many folks live only for today, party hard, and burn the candle from both ends, because for them, this present reality is all there is. A cute bumper sticker read: Death is life's way of telling you you're fired.

In an article from "The Lutheran", Grace Brame wrote: "Some of my students claim heaven is of no concern to them. Life is precious. This world matters, and it is all we have for sure. So why concern ourselves with something for which we have no evidence? Every night one of my friends prays that he will die before morning. He fervently hopes there is no hereafter. Something in him says eternal life is "pie in the sky," a human concoction that became dogma when it was accepted by enough people. Considering his many disappointments with God, why should he trust the next life will be any better than this one? For those who believe, how sad to have no hope". As Christians, we choose to fully embrace our lives and to thrive because there is a continuation of our existence **with God**. To assure us of this hope, Paul argues his point to the Corinthians: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised," he explains; "and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (vv. 13-14). The architecture of biblical hope rests on the bedrock of the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, if you do not believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, you have no hope at all.

Jesus also talks to us this morning about a life currently lived and one yet to come. In this week's gospel lesson, he takes special note of those who are both in a material hell - the poor, the destitute, and the hungry - and those in a spiritual hell - those suffering profound personal sorrow and rejection. It is those very people, the ones we might call the "un-blessables," that Jesus lavishes with his blessing. For those who appear to be in desirable circumstances - those wealthy, well-fed, and carefree, Jesus intones a somber "woe to you." Does this mean that having food on your table and money in your pockets is a bad thing? No. For Jesus, the issue is one's relationship to God and God's kingdom. It is easier for those who are meek, or impoverished, to realize the need for God's strength and support in their lives. For those who are enjoying the strength of a healthy body, home and bank account, the need for God's intervening hand is not so obvious.

Each of us has areas of our lives where we think we are doing great. Progress seems steady and perhaps even inevitable. We know where we want to go in life and how to get there. Jesus' curse to the rich and successful, however, should warn us that these are precisely the places where we most need God. When we are satisfied and comfortable, we are in danger of smugness. Conversely, where we think we are most vulnerable in our lives, those worrisome, weak spots in our armor, are actually the very places where God can make us the most secure.

Jesus speaks of the here and now but also to our future lives with him in heaven. He speaks to us in the "Hospice" of our lives. For some, it means that behaviors and attitudes here in this life will be dealt with in the afterlife. For others, the sorrows of this life will be repaid with blessings and happiness with him in heaven. Jesus often speaks in parables to his followers. Today, he tells it like it is. No escape clauses or excuses. Actions count for sure. But so do the intentions of our hearts. He knows us better than we do. We need to spend our days by living as if there will be another reality to follow this one. **Because there will be.** Count on it.

AMEN!