

4-12-2021

Remembering.

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Chaplaincy: the gift of remembering
By: Emmanuel Philor Sr

Like many, I began my journey as a chaplain with a limited purview of what my work entailed. The work I witnessed before entering the field of chaplaincy was a person who visited patients to offer them prayer when preparing for surgery or when death was imminent. Throughout this work, I learned the value of being present with our patients and creating a continuum of care, which offers spiritual and emotional support to the patients, their families, and the staff. When I walk into most patients' rooms, my role is often interpreted as what I once believed the role of a chaplain was. The thought of this often gives patients an overwhelming fear that they are going to die. This was the case until the novel coronavirus impacted our work in the hospital.

During the height of the nation's stay-at-home order, patients weren't allowed visitors unless death was imminent. As a result, the hospital halls were silent, elevators were swift, the cafeteria was empty, and the patients had an unbearable sense of loneliness. The patients bore the weighted look of children who were forgotten outside of their school by their parents. Family members could no longer come to see them and the only people they would see were those who took care of and provided for them. Coupled with this reality, hospital employees came to work with a fear that they may contract the virus by simply doing their jobs. The role of the chaplain meant much more during this season than it had in times past. Chaplains at this hospital (and others) found themselves visiting the nurses' station more often to care for them, while en route to care for the patients.

Like many other medical centers, our census was considerably smaller, which gave our chaplains the opportunity to engage with patients on a deeper level. We had the privilege to be there with the patients in a way that others couldn't. We weren't their loved ones, but we were the ones who loved them. We were at their bedside listening, laughing, crying, and sighing with them. We were there for them. We were present with them. I would learn the value of presence when I too was infected with the novel coronavirus. On April 10, 2020, I would learn that this illness that had killed so many others had now plagued me as well. The reality of becoming distant because I had been present was all too daunting. I was fearful of passing this illness onto my wife and then five-month-old son. I was fearful that on Good Friday this would be the crown of thorns (coronavirus) that brought me to the place of my demise. Following in the footsteps of a crucified thief, I asked Jesus to "remember me." This prayer was an action that said I had given up. The truth of the matter was that I had. I had all but planned my funeral. Then I recalled that I wasn't alone.

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What I didn't realize was that when I asked Jesus to remember me, Jesus responded with a community that would. Not only were my wife and child present with me throughout this time, but my family, friends, and coworkers also remembered me. They kept in touch with me, left groceries on my doorstep, mailed me resources from afar, and acknowledged my emotions. But most importantly, they remembered me. I was cleared to return to work on April 22 and remembered those who remembered me. When I had my triumphal entry through the hospital doors, I remembered the patients more deeply. I had become one with them. I found that my simple prayer had become a mantra for the work that we do. We Remember Them. We bear witness to their pains and aches. We create safe space for them to be. We are present with them, in such a way that our presence is remembered even when we are no longer there.

The restrictions have been lifted and some families have been able to gather with patients. The hallways are a bit more crowded, empty elevators are harder to find, and the cafeteria is more of a popular place. Still, we remember. We remember the tears shed and the laughter. We remember being there for those who needed us most. This is the work of chaplaincy. Remembering. Remembering people. The place of reminiscing with them throughout the good days and sitting with them on the days of deep despair. We remember the stories shared and the times well spent. We carry what we remember into the rest of our calling. Though corona (or the crown) began as torment, we take solace in sharing the things we can never forget. We embody that gift of presence, which breeds remembrance. This season has offered us the capacity to be with people in a place that feels lonely. The true gift of this work is found in our ability to be present, even in the places where we are most distanced. In the spaces where people struggle to stand, we remember to sit with them. But when we sit, our presence embodies the place in which others have traveled. Therefore, we remember.