

COMMUNION + IN THE ER + NAN KUHLMAN

Our young adult son limped out to the kitchen, digging around in the cupboard until he found the Ibuprofen. “What’s hurting?” I asked him.

“It’s this spot on the back of my leg,” he said as he grabbed some water from the fridge to wash down the clear, blue capsules. “I’ve had it a week or so, and it’s really starting to bother me.”

“Let me take a look,” I said, my mothering instincts rising to the fore. He raised his sweatpants to reveal a lump the size of a golf ball and a half. It was an abscess, with a sister abscess located a few inches below on his calf. “Why didn’t you say anything? This looks really bad.” Scary news stories about people losing limbs and lives to flesh-eating bacteria filled my head, and my stomach clenched.

“I had a couple lumps last week, smaller ones, but they went away on their own,” he continued. “These two have just gotten bigger, and they make it really hard to walk.”

He had been dealing with extreme eczema and using a super-steroid cream prescribed by a dermatologist to bring down the inflammation that made him scratch his arms and legs until they bled. The side effects of this cream stated that secondary skin infections were possible, and he was living proof of that.

Thankfully, my son had no fever, although he admitted he had a low-grade fever a few days before. Because of the holidays, our primary care physician’s office was closed, so we ended up in the ER.

As we waited in the examining room for the doctor, I tried to prepare him for what was ahead. I had had abscesses as the result of severe mastitis nearly twenty-five years before, and I remembered clearly the pain that was a part of draining the infection, cleaning the wound and packing it with cotton string to continue the draining.

“It’s going to hurt a lot when the doctor gets that infection out and then has to clean the wound. He or she will probably give you something to numb the cut, but it won’t really help that much.”

He nodded his head. Of all our children, he has the highest pain tolerance. I hoped that would help. The doctor came in and explained what she was going to do, reiterating what I had just told him. He watched as she used a scalpel to make a small incision in his calf; I kept my eyes on his face.

As she began to push the infection out, he closed his eyes and winced though he made no sound. Tears began to roll down my cheeks, and I could no longer sit idly by as the doctor and two nurses worked on his legs. I stood

beside the doctor, putting one hand on my son’s shoulder and the other on his hand that he held stiffly across his chest. I wanted to pray; I wanted to breathe and bring a sense of peace, but all I could do was cry and keep my hands firmly on him so he knew he was not alone.

Then I thought about taking communion, where we take the bread that represents Christ’s broken body and the wine or juice that stands for his shed blood, and it came to me that this sacred ritual helps us remember that God Incarnate knows what it’s like to suffer.

Just as I hadn’t forgotten the pain of my abscesses, so Jesus has not forgotten how it feels to hurt, whether physically or emotionally. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are reminding ourselves that when we suffer, we are not alone. Jesus is standing there, beside the doctor and nurses at work, a hand on our shoulder and a strong, warm hand holding our hand.

After we left the ER, I said to my son, “I hope I didn’t embarrass you when I held your hand in there,” suddenly aware that he was no longer a child.

“No, I needed something right then,” he said. We all need something when we’re in pain, a comforting presence to assure us that we won’t suffer alone.

Communion reminds us of this; receiving the bread and the wine into our bodies can serve as our reminder that our God “became flesh” to show solidarity and presence in the midst of a suffering world. □

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