

I received a phone call late one cold winter's night. The ambulance was at a home I had visited earlier in the evening. The wife wanted me to know that her husband was ill and headed to the emergency room. I arrived at the hospital and asked for Fred. All I accomplished was scaring the hospital staff as the man had not yet arrived via ambulance. It takes a little while to load an elder into an ambulance and transport them safely to the hospital. Without speeding, I had arrived at the hospital well in advance of the ambulance.

Once he arrived, I was able to join Fred in the Emergency room while a doctor tried to assess his situation. Fred was disoriented and did not understand the rapid-fire questions as they were coming at him. I knew Fred well enough to provide more accurate information than Fred could. After the rush to get his vital statistics, the staff left so that Fred and I invoke God's help.

In that quiet time, I offered him the Anointing of the Sick. Amidst the experience of powerlessness, illness and suffering, Jesus reaches out as the Good Shepherd to offer his healing touch. Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings are a rich sign of his love for us. "Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole man, soul and body; he is the physician the sick have need of. His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: 'I was sick, and you visited me'" (CCC 1503).

Jesus also identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to set us free from sin and to open the gates of eternity for us. I have been in the Emergency Room countless times with people on the verge of death ... people who were complete strangers to me, yet beloved children of God. I am always awestruck at God's love and mercy in those most difficult circumstances. I feel as if the Good Shepherd is just on the other side of the room, invisible, and yet tangibly present. "The gatekeeper opens [the door to eternity] for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out [of this world and into the next]. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice" (Jn 10:3-4). Christ is ever present with the suffering for those who see through the eyes of faith.

Illness often brings on anguish, and sometimes even despair and revolt against God. Fred was very much at peace, he was mature in his faith. He had lived a good life. He had been a kind and loving husband, a wise and caring father, a man who cared for his neighbors and looked out to help strangers in need. For Fred, love of God and love of neighbor were a priority. In the words of Jesus, "I know mine and mine know me" (Jn 10:14).

Fred once told me that as a homesteader, his home nearly burned down. He spent the night fighting a forest fire. He managed to keep the fire away from his home throughout the night. With the dawn, there were still embers and hot spots around his property, but the raging fire had subsided. It was Sunday and he understood the importance of keeping the sabbath. Placing his trust in God to take care of his home, Fred left what was left of the fire, cleaned up and brought his family to church to give thanks and praise to God.

Today is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Jesus instructed us to, "Pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2). We pray especially for vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. These vocations thrive when men and women accept the call to holiness through the vocation of marriage. They are mutually supportive.

The first time I met Fred, he was at Providence hospital in Anchorage. He told me of a disappointment in his life, a time when a priest had inadvertently let him down. He wanted to

renew his wedding vows for his 50th wedding anniversary, but the priest had a memory lapse, and the grand celebration never took place. There was no bitterness, simply disappointment.

More than half a century earlier, Fred saw a young lass that set his heart a flutter. He said to himself, that is the girl I am going to marry. With a chaste courtship and pure intentions, the two began married life together for better for worse, in sickness and in health. I met Fred in his declining years when his health was fragile, and trips to the doctor were frequent. The promises they made when they were young, united with God in an unbreakable covenant sustained them for more than 60 years of marriage. As that 60th anniversary approached, I asked them if they might renew their wedding vows at the Saturday evening Mass they normally attended before Fred was homebound and on oxygen. Fred and his blushing bride agreed.

On a warm summer's evening, before their brothers and sisters in Christ, the bride and groom of 60 years came before the assembly to renew their vows. Fred recited his vows with such love and conviction that all the men present began to tear up. Authentic love involves great sacrifice. True love expands our ability to love God and love our neighbor. Love strengthens the weak, heals the sick, binds up the injured.

Divine Love poured out from the cross conquers sin and death. Back to the emergency room, some months later in the dead of winter. Neither I nor Fred knew he would not return home to his beloved bride. Fred was a few days away from being reborn to eternal life. In the words of Jesus, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (Jn 10:9). "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" 1 (Jn 3:2).