

## Reflections on Faith and Life, February 7, 2021 (Epiphany 5)

*Synchronicity.* (Also called a “*God-wink.*”) A description of something that’s brought to your attention by two different sources within a short time-span. I first heard the term during my intern year at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution in 1997-1998. The chaplain, my supervisor, told me it was God’s way of getting me to listen. (Sometimes I seemed to be sort of hard-of-hearing where God was concerned.)

Yesterday I had a conversation with Keith Paul (newly elected President of St Stephen), and this morning, 26 hours later, a call from my mother. Keith told me he thought maybe some personal stories of my own past would be a good way to share how my faith has sustained me. My mother—completely out of the blue!—called to tell me exactly the same thing.

So . . . . In my daily devotions (coffee time before breakfast) I thank God for many things. Every day I start with thanksgiving for my doglets, and then “a good night’s sleep” [or occasionally, “enough sleep to get through this day”], “a whole body, health, healing, and a heart that beats.” These are unchanging gifts in my life. Then I go back to past gifts that have changed my life dramatically, and I thank God for cancers, depression, divorce, and my failed adoption of a young adult man.

I’ll start with cancer—not the 70+ skin cancers that have plagued me since 1980, nuisances but not life-threatening.

Let me tell you about one instance in my life when God’s grace was all that kept me going. In 2004 my annual mammogram showed a small lump. It was so small my doctor hadn’t even felt it the week before. But a biopsy showed cancer, and before I knew it, my life was spinning out of control, at the mercy of insurance guidelines, a surgeon I didn’t know, and a series of tests and appointments scheduled at everyone else’s convenience, but not mine.

My faith was rock solid. I had absolutely no fear of death. When I was interviewed by a colleague for a (very) theological publication, I surprised him by quoting Paul’s letter to the Romans: **“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”** (Romans 14:8). I had complete trust that God would be with me throughout my cancer journey. Possible death didn’t concern me.

What I *did* fear was the uncertainty of my future if I survived: I'd never had general anesthesia, or considered the possibility of chemotherapy; and having my life *continue* out of control was a fearsome thought for one who likes order and the status quo.

That was the first time in many years my trust in God's providence had been severely tested. Since my ordination in 1999, I've been committed to remaining open to God's presence and power in my life; but I guess I'd drifted somewhat in my own steadfastness. It was hard for me to feel God surrounding me with his own love and strength, and I cherished the support of my congregation, family, and friends.

According to my surgeon and oncologist, the cancer was completely removed. The lymph nodes were negative, and the surgeon *almost* said *I-told-you-so*. He'd wanted to do a lumpectomy, but I insisted on a mastectomy so I'd never have to worry about cancer in that breast again. I didn't need chemo or radiation, and five years later the oncologist said I was the healthiest patient he had. Just FYI, I chose to have the other breast removed after a year of wearing a prosthesis I seriously disliked.

Was that journey easy? No—but for me it wasn't the terrifying, life-determining event it could have been. It did change how I related to God, and I continue to thank God daily for the fact that having experienced a potentially life-threatening disease, I can be available emotionally to others with a cancer diagnosis.

Next week's *Reflections* will be about Lent, with Ash Wednesday coming up on February 17<sup>th</sup>. After that, I'll share some of my experience of life-long depression.

Peace! May God sanctify (make holy) *all* our ways, all our days, all our thoughts and intentions! Amen.