

## I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

As a pastor, I'm always interested in hearing or reading about the experiences of other parish ministers. I enjoy them because this profession I've been called to is unique—I dare say it's unlike any other profession on earth—and when another minister shares a story about something funny, or sad, or unusual, or touching that happened to him or her, even if it's something that's never happened to me personally, it helps reassure me that I'm not alone in this challenging occupation, where you walk into the office every day knowing that anything can happen, and probably will.

I'm also heartened to know that other men and women have gone through the same kinds of highs and lows and struggles and frustrations I go through on an almost daily basis, and have lived to tell the tale. Take the story I'm about to share with you. The experience this minister wrote about didn't happen to me *per se*, but my ministry has had numerous experiences that were similar to it, therefore I could genuinely relate to it. And I think lessons can be learned from it by almost any follower of Jesus Christ. Here's what happened, in the minister's own words.

The nursing home service was scheduled to last half-an-hour. This particular one could have been scheduled for ten minutes and it would have been about seven minutes too long. The twenty or so residents who faithfully attended that Sunday afternoon worship service were gathered in the lounge-transformed-into-a-sanctuary. I greeted many of them by name and introduced myself to the rest. I explained the theme for the day and announced the first hymn out of the large-print-hymnal.

During the singing of that hymn, I noticed a woman in the very back. Actually she was seated out in the hallway, but the lounge's wide double doors made the hallway seem like an extended section of the lounge. I had never seen this elderly woman—obviously a resident at the nursing home—at one of these worship services before, so I figured that she must be new to the facility. Either that, or she felt a need for worship on this particular day that she hadn't felt before.

The woman was noticeable to me mostly because of her singing. Well, actually it wasn't singing as much as it was moaning in accompaniment

with the singers. No understandable words came out of her mouth, but it was clear to me that she was making a joyful noise by randomly using the vocal cords God had granted her.

After the hymn I offered a prayer and read a couple of Bible readings. The woman was quiet during the prayer, but she started to murmur during the Bible readings. The noise was an annoyance, to be sure, but it wasn't overly disruptive. Then I started to preach an abbreviated version of my Sunday sermon, changing some of the illustrations to make it more pertinent for those who lived in a nursing home. As I spoke, the volume of the woman's mutterings gradually grew louder and started to distract the other residents. I did my best to ignore the noise and go on with the service, hoping in vain that the disturbance the woman was causing would eventually stop without calling attention to her.

It didn't stop. The longer I went on—and I wasn't all that long—the louder the woman became, until her noise turned into a full-fledged scream. I was quickly losing my audience. More heads were turning toward her than toward the lectern I was preaching from. I raised my voice to a level just below a shout so I could be heard above the sounds of the woman. That's when the woman said her first understandable words. "Shut up!" she yelled at me. Shaken but undaunted, I finished up my sermon as quickly as I could while still being faithful to the Scripture reading and to the other residents who had made the effort to come to the worship service.

At the end of my sermon I announced the hymn that was to be sung. That was when the only other understandable words the woman spoke that afternoon came out of her mouth: "Thank you." She had been waiting to sing. She didn't do it well, but she did it the only way she could in praise of her God. All the talking—the praying, the Bible readings, the sermon—were meaningless to her. But the hymns . . . the hymns spoke to her. So we all sang together: me, the nursing home residents, and the loud woman. Her moaning to the music was much louder than before, but she wasn't angry like she had been just a few seconds before.

At the conclusion of the hymn I announced another prayer. It was too much for the woman. She didn't want any more prayer, any more words, so her wailing reached its highest intensity. At that point even the nursing home staff down the hall could hear her, and one of them came and quickly wheeled her away to her room. It was not soon enough for many of the worshipers, but at least they would hear the closing prayer.

Or would they?

The woman moaned a hymn all the way down the hall. She wanted to

sing again, and sing she would. And if she had to do it by herself, without any accompaniment and without words, while being pushed away from the group, then so be it. She would sing anyhow. Nothing and no one could stop her. And the worship group was treated to her eerie, slowly fading solo as I began to pray.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus charged his disciples with a vital task. They were to bring to all the nations of the world the truth of the Gospel, through baptism and the teaching of Jesus' words. That's a very daunting job, a highly intimidating responsibility. But Jesus didn't leave his disciples without the tools to accomplish that work. Not only had he been their teacher and friend through the previous three years, he also promised that he would be with them to the very close of the age. Nothing the disciples did would ever separate them from the loving presence of Jesus.

Perhaps the upset woman at the nursing home worship service knew that. Maybe she knew and felt the presence of Jesus in her life. After all, Christ's promise of his eternal presence was for her as well, wasn't it? If Jesus was present in that nursing home service to the woman whose ability to communicate was severely limited—and I have to believe he was—her only expression of Jesus' presence was in her loud moaning, in her willingness to be different by making unintelligible sounds with such volume that no one could ignore it.

Perhaps there are some people—maybe even some of us here this morning, sitting in those pews—who have wanted to yell at the pastor to “shut up” in the middle of a sermon. Not at me and my sermon, of course! I'm talking about other pastors and their sermons. But maybe some sermon you were listening to was getting in the way of Jesus' presence. Maybe you wanted the preacher to be quiet so a meaningful hymn could be sung, or the choir or guest vocalist could offer a special anthem.

Perhaps you wanted—no, you genuinely needed—a prayer of assurance, healing and compassion to be prayed; or a personal word with a fellow worshiper to be shared—because that's how the presence of Christ is revealed to you. Our Lord works that way, you know. Here you are just sitting in church, minding your own business or doing some ordinary “church” thing. Maybe you're even a little bored or restless. Then all of a sudden, and quite unexpectedly, Christ pulls back the heavenly curtain and says hello to you. “Here I am. I haven't forgotten you or abandoned you because, remember, I am always with you.”

The presence of the risen Jesus can come to us in many different ways, shapes and forms. Maybe I see Jesus' presence where you don't, or vice versa. But no matter how Christ chooses to manifest himself to you or me, we will only

be able to sense Jesus' divine presence if we're open and accessible and continually ready to recognize and receive it.

Christ's presence can happen through a sermon, or in spite of one. It can happen during a worship service, or down at Neighboring, or working at the office, or while we're outside mowing the lawn, or playing with the kids, or lying in bed trying to fall asleep, or while shopping at the WalMart. It's wonderful to know that, through all of our life, every moment and every aspect of it, Christ has promised to be with us always. And that's true no matter where we are or what the condition of our life is. Christ is with us even if we find ourselves confined to a wheelchair and pushed to places we may not want to go.

Because that promise of Jesus is true, it can truly transform our lives. Think about it. When the workday isn't going the way we like, or the kids aren't being little angels like we want them to be and we feel like screaming in frustration, Christ is present.

When our health takes a turn for the worse and we find ourselves in the hospital, hooked up to IVs and other ugly, noisy, confining life-saving instruments, Christ is present.

When our family life is filled with tension and conflict and the people we love the most are the ones we're getting along with the least, Christ is present.

When the world seems like it's falling apart at the seams, and we read all those depressing headlines in the newspaper and hear the talking heads on our favorite news channel drone on about war and terrorism and murder and political scandals and natural disasters and threats to human existence until we finally reach our limit and just can't take it anymore, and we have to hold ourselves back from hurling a chair at the television set or ripping up the newspaper into little shreds, Christ is present.

When we lose a loved one or a good friend to death, and we cry and cry to the point that we didn't realize how many tears we could actually shed, Christ is present.

Yes, through it all, and in spite of it all, the promise of Christ being with us is a reality. In worship and in the sacraments, in hymns and in prayers, in the reading of Holy Scripture and in the sermons, and yes, even in church meetings that last for hours and seem to accomplish very little, even though we might have to look a little harder and it may take a little longer to find him, Jesus is there. Throughout all our life, Jesus' presence is there.

We know this, we believe this, and we have faith that it's true because we have heard the promise of the risen Christ himself. "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." And that's a promise we can live by and ground our lives in. Thanks be to God. Amen.