

Myrna Koonce of St. Paul's, Brunswick – August 9, 2020

Carolyn has asked me to say something about my work as chaplain during this pandemic.

Be still, then, and know that I am God. I find myself reciting these words from Psalm 46 often these days.

To say these are turbulent times is an understatement. In my work as palliative chaplain at Maine Medical Center, I have conversations every day with patients (and their families) whose lives have been thrown into disarray by serious illness. Now, with the coronavirus, more layers of disorientation have been added. People are coping with job loss, lack of healthcare, social dislocation, and a human touch deficit. For a while, families, friends, even community clergy could not come in to the hospital at all except 24 hours before a patient's death, and even then only one at a time. As with every hospital in this country, we have witnessed so much valiant effort and deep distress, isolation and separation counterbalanced by the kindness and compassion of caregivers, in the face not only of the virus but of institutional responses to the virus which have created unintended, perhaps even inevitable, harm.

Amidst it all, we on the palliative team have continued our essential work: helping patients identify what is most important in the time that is left to them, how they want to live until they die, and how they want to die when the time comes. There have been many gifts for me in this work, and even more so now. Gosnell House, an in-patient hospice in Scarborough, has continued to allow a limited number of family or friends to be with the dying patient each day. What was viewed with suspicion by many before the pandemic, dying in a hospice house, has now become an oasis. Some patients who are going home on hospice have expressed a singular goal: to live until the election in November. Even in their serious illness, they care for the wider world and the next generation. And those for whom death is not quite so near have readjusted their priorities, letting go of material wants, opening up their spirits to the nourishment of connection in new and unexpected ways. I have witnessed patients transcending their disease, coping with their fears for the future and making meaning of their mortality.

What keeps me grounded is the deep belief that God is present in all of the turbulence and the change, and that, while we cannot predict the future, we can do our best to live out God's kingdom, moment by moment, day by day. At St. Paul's, I have witnessed our prayer and pastoral groups who are so faithfully serving those in need, in illness, and in crisis, and parishioners continuing to work for justice and dignity of all persons, especially the marginalized, not going back to normal, but forging ahead. I am overwhelmed by the love our parishioners have poured out for each other and for the most vulnerable and forgotten in our world. At a recent Zoom coffee hour, I myself was the grateful recipient of this godly love, which I sorely needed.

May our gratitude, generosity, compassion and zeal for justice continue to find its source in you, Holy Spirit.