

Traveling Companion: He waited until you came

Fr. Michael Tracey

The phone rang on Wednesday afternoon. A family called. Their father, who had cancer, was dying, and wanted a priest to come and give him the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

Armed with the house address on a sticky note, I went. As I pulled up to the house, a gentleman was outside, talking on a cell phone. I asked some bystanders if this was the right house and they agreed by ushering me inside the white framed house.

As I entered the screened in back porch, I encountered four women sitting, sipping coffee. One of them ushered me up a small stairs and into a bedroom to the left. Randy lay in a hospital bed, curled up in a fetal position. He pulled furiously on oxygen that fed his lungs through a canola in his nose. His daughter and granddaughter, along with some younger children sat guarding his bedside. His daughter kept stroking her father's arm with great determination. The tears flowed freely down her face as she brushed them aside as well as her long, straight black hair. Every few moments, she would ask, "Where are they?" She was wondering about the hospice nurse who was supposed to be on the way to the house. The granddaughter gently stroked his bald, eggshell like, head, as she glanced at me with sad, tear-filling eyes.

I glanced at all the framed pictures that hung on the wall beside his bed. They were pictures of happier days. One was a portrait of Randy as a young man; others included family members gathered together for various celebrations. Amid all the pictures, a framed copy of Psalm 23 guarded all the other pictures.

I invited the rest of the family to join us around Randy's bedside for the Anointing of the Sick. They did and answered the usual prayers. When it was over, everyone remained in silence for a few moments, listening to Randy's erratic breathing.

Sensing that Randy's final moments were near, I invited the family members to tell him that they loved him and to say their goodbyes. The tears became more profuse as one after another, they approach the bed and, emphatically but lovingly shared their love and said their goodbyes. His daughter remained sitting by her father's bedside, spoke her own private thoughts and ended by saying, "Daddy, you are going to a better place. We will be together again. We love you." As she said the words, a torrent of tears rushed down her cheeks.

A few moments later, the moment arrived. Everyone in the room sensed it and knew it. Randy's light went out ever so gently as everyone remained stunned but silent. Someone rushed out to announce to others, "He is gone." They too rushed in to see for themselves and to shed their own private tears. Even some grandchildren in elementary school, came in, looked and burst into tears as they reached for the embrace of a nearby adult to comfort them. The time was 2:19 p.m.

Minutes later, a gentleman arrived with a machine and some plastic tubes. He indicated he was a respiratory therapist. He began to put together the machine and pieces of tubing. He asked me which family member was in charge. I looked at him in disbelief. He kept looking for a plug to plug his machine into as he said, "I want to show the family how to use this machine." I tried to tell him that it was over but it took him a long time to get the message.

As I stood there, one of the family members came into the room, looked at the still body in the bed and said, "He waited until you got here." I had to agree.

When I finally left and was on my way home, I began to realize that people often remark that the Lord works in strange ways. Maybe it is not so much that the Lord works in strange ways but that we have a hard time recognizing ways that seem "strange" to us but very natural, loving and timely to God.