

Thursday Afternoon

John Buttrey II

I visit him at the nursing home every Thursday afternoon. He says, he doesn't get too many visitors, so he appreciates our time together. His children try to visit occasionally, but two of them live in another state, with children and grandchildren of their own. Usually it is once a year, during the holidays, that he sees one or both of them, but seldom his grandchildren. His wife passed away about three years ago. He always tells me how he feels, very alone in the world. Frequently, he talks about the aches and pains of growing older. I am learning that these aches and pains are more than physical in nature.

The staff at the nursing facility seems nice. They appear to be attentive to his needs. However, though a constant presence in his life, they are no family to him. To them, he is a case number, and a sometimes difficult patient. While their care can be compassionate, he is still a daily and nightly assignment, a required duty to earn their pay.

Life brings him little joy any more. Another morning only means another day of being wheeled throughout the nursing home to play games, watch old movies, or some other event planned by the staff, to hopefully break up the monotony of the long days. On the tray table by his bed, I can see that Thursday afternoon's activity is Bingo. I ask, "Are you going to go?" He nods his head affirmatively.

Our conversations are generally short. I enter his room and stupidly ask, "How are you doing today?" He gazes up at me from his wheelchair, with a look that indicates the ridiculousness of my question. However, after a long pause, he graciously tells me he is fine, but I know better. He is lonely. He has lost his freedom of mobility. He is physically and emotionally suffering. I marvel that he still maintains a good sense of humor. I try to have a joke planned to share with him. Generally, I can get a smile or snicker from him.

Across the hall from his room, I can hear an older woman with a weak voice, asking for help. He tells me in a frustrated voice, "She was doing that all night again."

Apparently it is a symptom of her dementia. It makes me wonder what the nights must be like in such a place. That time when the silence of the reduced staff and visitors, and dimmed lights, gives way to the sound of beeping equipment, confused voices calling for family members, and frightened shouts for help.

During our visits together, I often think of Job, and how his friends came to comfort him. I hope I am better in my attempts to comfort my much older friend, and brother in Christ. Our families go back many years. He and his wife were close friends of my parents. I know his children well. Before I leave, we pray together. He always says, "Thank you." We exchange smiles, and I assure him I will see him next Thursday afternoon.

Through many Thursday afternoons, I have watched my older friend quickly decline. He has been moved from facility to facility, each with more intensive care. Our conversations are getting shorter and shorter. He grows more and more distant, weaker and weaker. He is no longer in his wheelchair, but confined to his bed. He is seemingly tied down, with a number of intravenous tubes, and various medical machinery. I no longer ask, "How are you doing?" I pray for him, hoping he can hear through the comma. It has all been a valuable lesson in the brevity of life. I appreciate all the more the words of Jesus, "I was sick and you visited Me" (Matt. 25:36).

Another Thursday afternoon arrives, but today I have no place to go. The memorial service for my brother will be Saturday morning. All the family will be flying in to attend. I will miss our visits. I will miss my brother. I knew this moment would come, but I still feel a sense of disbelief. I am so thankful we are able to spend some quality time together. I truly hope I was an encouragement to him, for he certainly was to me. I wonder if Thursday afternoons will ever be the same.

I was thinking about my old friend and brother in Christ today. It was forty years ago that he passed away. Now, it is I who sit in the wheelchair, awaiting meals and recreational activities. It is I who long for visitors, and miss my recently departed wife. I know where all this is leading, but I still feel a sense of disbelief. Thankfully, there is one young man from my church who comes regularly to visit. He is a real encouragement to me. He visits me every Thursday afternoon...