

BELIEF *By Kathryn Barlow-Williams*

Praying that we fall on the side of grace

"Can you come pray for a man who is dying?" a nurse from a nearby hospital called to ask. "He won't last much longer." After I agreed, she explained the situation. "The patient is dying of AIDS, and his family does not want his partner in the room."

Fresh out of seminary, I was not prepared for the call. Nothing in seminary had prepared me. When I stepped off the hospital elevator, I found the partner doubled over in a chair as if he had been beaten by grief. He had no legal right to enter the room to say goodbye.



Kathryn Barlow-Williams writes about a man dying of AIDS.

The situation crashed into my well-structured ideals of right and wrong, faith and love, compassion and judgment.

After introducing myself, I sat down while he quietly sobbed into his knees. Fumbling and awkward, my pleas for divine intervention were mixed with regret that I had picked up the phone.

Nonetheless, I listened

when the man composed himself enough to tell me about the two decades he had shared with his partner.

When the family left to grab a bite to eat, the nurse told us we could slip into the room. The patient's shallow breaths racked his skeletal body. The partner wept. The nurse adjusted tubes. I just stood there.

As a seminary student, I did an internship at a maximum security prison. Shocked by its horrors, I asked my supervisor, "What good is my work here? I can't do anything to help these men or their victims." As

I stood helpless in that hospital room, his words returned to me. "Your job is not to fix anything. Your job is to offer the ministry of Christ's presence."

The nurse joined us to form a circle around the patient as I prayed. Though strangers, we held hands to form an odd but comforting trinity. When I said "amen," tears streamed down the partner's face, and he mouthed the words trapped beneath the lump in his throat, "Thank you."

An hour can change your heart forever. For a few moments, I

was gripped in a cosmic tug of war between law and grace. Pulled outside my comfort zone, I fell on the side of grace.

The man with AIDS died shortly after the visit. His partner was not welcomed to what the family considered a true Christian funeral, so we later met at the graveside to celebrate this life.

Recently, my denomination changed the constitution regarding the covenant of marriage. Instead of declaring it a union between "a man and a woman," it now reads "marriage is a unique relationship between two people, traditionally a man and a woman."

Outraged, some of our churches and members have left the denomination. I will not leave

the Presbyterian Church (USA). Instead, I will pray for more grace and more love to enter our hearts — regardless of where we stand on the issue of homosexuality.

Wouldn't it be a miracle if a group of people could serve and love others even when they disagree? Wouldn't it be amazing if church members could work together to minister to people who have been pushed beyond the reach of love and hope? Wouldn't that be the true reflection of the Christ found in the Gospel? In the cosmic tug of war between law and grace, I pray that we fall on the side of grace.

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