Word & World
Volume 30, Number 1
Winter 2010

Hope in Hospice? Accompaniment of the Spirit through Life's Journey

DEBORAH L. GEWEKE

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.[1]

Very early on in my hospice ministry—ironically, or perhaps especially, because I was engaged in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at the time—Susan[2] taught me a lasting lesson on the nature of hope. While Susan lived only a short while after her admission to hospice, her impact on my understanding of death and dying continues, albeit vicariously, to contribute to the way I minister to the terminally ill and their loved ones. I recall one profound interaction in particular. Based on prior pastoral conversation with Susan, and freshly indoctrinated in CPE methodology, *my* goal (a problem in and of itself!) for this particular visit was to confront Susan with what I had interpreted as her ongoing "denial." As we discussed her prognosis and her hopes, Susan stated, with an absolute certainty that served to

[1]Thomas A. Dorsey, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," stanza 1, #773 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

[2]Patient's name changed for means of confidentiality and in accordance with HIPPA regulations.

Though their time may be short, those in hospice can nevertheless live in hope—hope given as they are accompanied by God's Spirit and by God's people, who serve as Christ-bearers to and for them.

confirm my CPE suspicion, "Chaplain, I know God won't disappoint." There it was—denial! So with the acumen of a relatively new chaplain and with the benefit of then three whole weeks of Extended CPE, I confronted Susan in her "denial." "Susan," I replied, "but what if you *do* die?" Without blinking an eye (probably because they were locked in a quizzical look of disbelief), Susan responded, "Well, *Chaplain*, then I guess *especially* in that case God won't disappoint!"

Since that time, and with the contribution of many more wise "Susans," I have come to understand and incorporate in my patient care the guiding principle that hope is both transforming and transformative. Such "progressive transformation"[3] is characteristic of many hospice patients, particularly those within the faith community. As a hospice chaplain, I have come to recognize my role in the interdisciplinary care of patients and families as intentionally accompanying the dying through a changing course of hope that often progresses from an initial hope for cure, through the hope for care (of loved ones), and, finally, to a hope for the kingdom of God—as that ongoing relationship with God that has sustained the patient through life and will continue beyond death.

In this article, I explore the faith-based foundation for this hope within the Christian community, a community that is (1) grounded in assembly, (2) mediated by a pneumatic reality, and (3) experienced as sacramental accompaniment, participating in salvation's fullness through the power and presence of the Spirit.

Christian Assembly as the Ground of Hope

Precious Lord, take my hand…

There can be no doubt that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is among the worst human tragedies facing humanity today. In commenting on the role of the church in ministering to those touched by this illness, (then) Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of Cape Town, South Africa, avowed:

> I am committed to the principle that no one shall die alone, but more importantly no one should care alone. We need each other. We need our communities. We need our families. We need our friends and loved ones. We need them to help alleviate th[is] suffering….God will give us the strength to do this.[4]

While addressing the specific needs among those who suffer from HIV/AIDS, the commitment of Archbishop Ndungane appropriately reflects a biblical certainty—the centrality of community in accompanying the sick and dying and the presence of God abiding within that community.

Community as the Basis for Hope

According to the biblical witness, whenever the community of faith gathered

[3]See Richard L. Schaper, "Pastoral Accompaniment of the Cancer Patient," *Journal of Religion and Health* 23/2 (1984) 145.

[4]Cited in T. D. Mashau, "Where and When It Hurts Most: The Theology of Hope and Accompaniment in the Context of HIV and Aids in Marriage and Family Life," *Exchange* 37/1 (2008) 25.

as "holy assembly," the saving action of God was realized in and through God's very presence. This is the claim of Gordon Lathrop, whose "liturgical ecclesiology" establishes that it is especially within the context of community that God acts. Lathrop suggests that the biblical witness establishes a chain of events wherein God's saving action is connected to the holy assembly of the community of faith.

according to the biblical witness, whenever the community of faith gathered as "holy assembly," the saving action of God was realized in and through God's very presence

Within the covenant community of Israel, Lathrop identifies a number of paradigmatic assemblies in which God acts salvifically, especially "the assemblies at Sinai, at the return from exile, and at the end," on the day of the Lord, when all nations will "come to Mt. Zion."[5] It is the very presence of God at these definitive assemblies of Israel that establishes the community's hope in the saving (and for Susan, analogously, satisfying) action of God. This is, moreover, characteristic of the progressive transformation that marks the hospice journey of many dying members of the community of faith, where it is

> not unusual for the center of gravity of a patient's hope to shift, often almost imperceptibly on the surface, from transitional "little hope" the patient desires to realize before dying toward a deeper and transcending hope for what may come after death. This shifting focus may be described as movement from "hoping for" to "hoping in," as specific wishes give way to a deeper trust in a God in whose hands the future is believed to lie.[6]

This transforming hope is grounded in the biblical assurance that God *has* acted, that God *continues* to act, and that God *will* act in order to grant the community of faith itself, and all those within it, transformation—even (and perhaps especially) in the face of greatest suffering.

This is the proclamation of Paul to the Christian community in Rome when he declares that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39.) This Pauline confession, while serving as words of comfort to the bereaved at many contemporary funerals, was originally directed to a Roman community that, like every community before and since, had struggled over keeping God's law and the inner conflict of sin (cf. Rom 7:7–25). Paul's response directs not only the Roman community of faith, but our own communities as well, to place our hope not in the law—our failure to adhere to which separates us from God—but in the "love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," vis-à-vis our life in the

[5]Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999) 32.
[6]Schaper, "Pastoral Accompaniment,"146.

Spirit (Rom 8:1–17), through whom separation ceases, connection is made, communion exists, and union happens.

Love as the Source of Hope

The problem of love and the law is a perpetual one, addressed not only by Paul, but often the source of the spiritual struggles of Martin Luther. Marked as they were by his ever-present wrestling with the seeming juxtaposition of the demands of the law and the grace of God in the love of Christ, Luther's struggles, and indeed those of all people of faith, are illustrated by Paul in his correspondence with the church at Rome. Paul illustrates the inner conflict of sin, stating, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:19–20). In both 1519 and 1535, Luther addresses this existential conflict between love and the law in his lectures on Galatians, the paradigmatic example of this issue in the Pauline corpus.

> ***"The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.…Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good."***

Luther's understanding of love was dualistic. On the one hand, Luther identifies *human* love as "always basically selfish," where "*self*-love defines the content and the object of the love."[7] In contrast, *God's* love, according to Luther, is such that, "God loves in a way opposite to human love: 'The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.…Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good.'"[8] For Luther, the ultimate bestowal of God's love takes place in the incarnated expression of God's love—Jesus, as the Christ and in his cross. For the faithful, who, like Luther, continue to struggle between the demands of the law and the ineffectiveness of human love, it is turning to the love of God that enables us to cast off the sin in which we would otherwise abide and to abide instead in God. As Jesus the beloved of God proclaims, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:9–10). For Luther, this turn to God's love is as unattainable for us as keeping the Father's commandments—that is, until we recognize that Luther's Christology is pneumatically grounded (grounded in the Spirit).

Whether we look to Luther's explanation of the third article of the creed or his *Lectures on Galatians*, it is strikingly clear that Luther's understanding of God's

[7]Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "'The Christian as Christ to the Neighbour': On Luther's Theology of Love," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6/2 (2004) 103–104 (emphasis mine.)

[8]Ibid., 104 (quoting Luther).

love is such that God's justificatory gift and grace is so beneficent as to enable us to make the turn (repentance) and live the law (in/as love). "[T]he righteous man himself does not live; but Christ lives in him, because through faith Christ dwells in him and pours His grace into him, through which it comes about that man is governed, not by his own spirit but by Christ's."[9] It is our reception of the Holy Spirit, whom Augustine understood as the Love between the Lover (Father) and the Beloved (Son), which enables a new "obedience" to the law. Herein lies the hope by which Susan, and all the faithful, are able to claim certainty and eschew disappointment in the divine. For, by the Holy Spirit, the faithful are drawn into the love of God as mediated by the crucified and risen Christ. In this, separation ceases, connection is made, communion exists, and union happens.

The Pneumatic Reality of a Kingdom Community

> *When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,*
> *when my life is almost gone,*
> *hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall.*
> *Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*[10]

The poignant prayer in this beloved hymn is that God may "linger near," in a proximity close enough to "take my hand." One might envision this proximal relationship with God to be a thing of the past, a mere remnant from the time in which God walked in gardens or spoke from bushes or, at least, last realized in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. But "distance" from the divine is not a uniquely contemporary problem, as is evidenced in particular by the issues confronting the late first-century community of John the Evangelist.

Among the four canonical Gospels, John is perhaps the most pneumatological. Perhaps this is a function of divine distance. The last canonical Gospel to be written, John, in grand literary and theological style, addresses the needs of a community that is distanced from the *earthly* presence of God in the person of Jesus by as much as sixty to seventy years. Regardless of rationale, the author of John develops a pneumatology that clearly enables distant communities of faith (separated from Jesus particularly by time) to connect to Christ in such a way as to comprehend God as a living and life-giving reality.

Unique to the Fourth Gospel, perhaps due to the distant circumstance of John's community, are the Farewell Discourses of Jesus (John 14–17.) Within these three chapters (concluding with Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in chapter 17) Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure from them. Within those preparations is an element likewise unique to John—the Paraclete (or Advocate).

It is the Paraclete who answers the prayer for proximity, who gives confidence to Susan, and who provides hope in hospice! Jesus assures his disciples, "I will ask

[9]Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), in *Luther's Work*s, vol. 27, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) 238.

[10]Dorsey, "Precious Lord," stanza 2.

the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (John 14:16–17). With this pronouncement, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for his earthly departure from them. In strikingly similar fashion, Jesus concludes his preparation with prayer offered not only for his immediate disciples but for those faithful who would follow even more distanced by time:

> I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:20–22)

Sounding conspicuously mystical, the proclamation of the Fourth Gospel boldly asserts the principal claims of a *pneumatological* Christology, namely, that:

> in answer to his prayer the Father will give his disciples "another paraclete"….This is the Holy Spirit, whose function is thus said, by implication, to be identical with that of Christ, but who is yet distinguished from him….As the revealer of Christ he takes the place of the physical presence of the incarnate Word, and is in this sense "another paraclete" ([4:]16), being present at the side of Christ's followers…being with them as an indwelling personal presence (vss. 17, 20–24). It is through the Spirit that Christ will be known and manifested.[11]

In this way, the Holy Spirit serves the *soteriological* function of the Paraclete—to "make known" (ἀναγγέλλω) the words and work of Jesus the Christ. In so doing, the Spirit also makes known the person of Christ. This is a claim particularly within the Lutheran tradition, recognizing that Luther did not distinguish between the person and the work of Christ. This claim can, moreover, appeal to a Johannine mystical theology, which asserts the perichoretic union between Father, Son, and Spirit—each "abiding" and inhering in the other.

Similarly, the Spirit serves the *eschatological* function of the Paraclete, whereby "ἀναγγέλλω takes the object τὰ ερχόμενα," that is, "making known" takes as its object "what is coming" (John 16:13).[12] These differing functions of the Paraclete are perhaps best recognized in the Johannine Farewell Discourses in a shift that takes place between the first discourse (John 14) and the second and third discourses (John 15–16,) wherein the reader is directed from the past events of Jesus' earthly work toward the future events in the life of the ongoing Christian community. According to Hans-Ulrich Weidemann:

> [T]he reader already knows the "end of the story," so the aim of the Farewell Discourse is not to keep them in suspense about the outcome of the narrative,

[11]G. W. H. Lampe, "Paraclete," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 3:654.

[12]Crinisor Stefan, "The Paraclete and Prophecy in the Johannine Community," *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 27/2 (2005) 282.

> but rather to provide them with the specific Johannine interpretation of the Easter events. So the point of the discourse is not to impart *new* information, but rather to combine the passion and Easter traditions with other traditions; e.g. eschatological or ecclesiological proverbs.[13]

As the Paraclete is developed in Johannine theology, movement between past and future is actualized in the present (and equally within every historically situated Christian community). As such, the pneumatic reality of all communities oriented around the reign of God, whether John's or our own, is such that the drawing forward of past (salvific) event and the pulling back of future (eschatological) event make all historically situated current experiences of the Christian community anamnetic—that is, participating in the real presence of Christ. Given this ever-present continuum of past salvation and future fulfillment (of God's reign), each *present* community of faith is marked by perichoretic union, the love that spills over from the divine relationship itself to include now the creation.

each present community of faith is marked by perichoretic union, the love that spills over from the divine relationship itself to include now the creation

Such is the claim of Gordon Lathrop, who recognizes the impact of such a spiritual reality on every communal expression of the Christian faith as each holy assembly leads "to the day of God by incorporating the baptized into the community that tasted the down payment of that day in the presence of the Crucified and Risen One and in the Spirit that was poured out from his cross and resurrection. It was itself an eschatological reality by being *drawn into* the very life and name of the triune God."[14] Such a relationship with the divine, so proximal that it might be described as union with or abiding in one another, joins the christological/justificatory and pneumatological/sanctificatory effects of God's saving acts in an eschatology that is perhaps best "realized" within the communal/liturgical experience of the faithful—the holy assembly in which separation ceases, connection is made, communion exists, and union happens.

Experiential Accompaniment

Take my hand, precious Lord…

The hymnic prayer might be heard as a plaintive wail. Indeed, it often is. "Take my hand," a different Susan's actions pleaded, as another hospice patient expended her remaining strength in reaching for my hand. Then, she died.

The reason that "hope in hospice" ought not be punctuated with a question

[13]Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, "Eschatology as Liturgy: Jesus' Resurrection and Johannine Eschatology," in *Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of Joh*n, ed. Craig R. Koester and Reimund Bieringer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 291.

[14]Lathrop, *Holy People*, 143 (emphasis mine).

mark, but rather an exclamation point, is because of the hands that reach out in love. Hands like those our Lord stretched out in healing. Or the hands of the Samaritan, binding the wounds of his enemy. Or the hands of the woman, scolded by the disciples but received by Jesus as she anointed him before his death. This biblical image "does not encourage the spirit of withdrawing from the world and its problems. On the contrary, it encourages Christians to participate in a meaningful way in the…suffering in this world. This encourages the church, out of compassion and mercy, to identify and accompany those in pain in their journey in life."[15] Such is the role of a paraclete—one who is called alongside another.

Walking with Jesus

There is a physicality to faith that often must be revealed (ἀναγγέλλω) to the faithful and acted upon among the faithful with intentionality. "Take my hand…" is a call to action. Indeed, for our Lord, "the relationships which define Jesus are themselves mediated and defined physically: as accompaniment, as 'being with' or 'walking with.'"[16] Within the context of the earthly flesh-and-blood Jesus, the saving actions of God are often, and oftentimes miraculously, meted out. That is the very incarnational experience of the community's encounter with a literally enfleshed God.

By its very nature, accompaniment is incarnational. Accompaniment claims the physicality of walking with one another as we journey through life as readily and actually as did Jesus.

But what of the distance that separates the holy assembly from a proximal relationship with God due to the community's being historically situated in today? Perhaps the most fitting response of the church to this question comes from Hispanic/Latino(a) traditions, which comprehend identifying with those in pain and participating with those who suffer as "accompaniment."

By its very nature, accompaniment is incarnational. Accompaniment claims the physicality of walking with one another as we journey through life as readily and actually as did Jesus. Moreover, such an active, incarnational orientation to faith "exists where one affirms that concrete, particular reality, not only through assent of faith, but also through the physiological, material act of taking and eating the bread, and taking and drinking from the cup."[17] Just as our Lord stretched out his hands to receive the sick, so do we reach with outstretched hands to receive our Lord. In so doing, faith that is active embodies accompaniment that is sacramental,

[15]Mashau, "Where and When," 31–32.

[16]Roberto Goizueta, *Cominemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 68.

[17]Ibid., 49.

joining together in one anamnetic moment justification and sanctification, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit, Creator and creature vis-à-vis divine indwelling.

Person as Sacrament—Epicletic Eschatology

Literally, the meaning of "accompaniment"—*ad-cum-panis*—is "bread with another."[18] Perhaps no one more graphically illustrated the impact of accompaniment or grounded its theological basis in the Eucharist than Luther. "As Christ has given himself to the Christians in the bread and wine," intimated Luther,

> so also do Christians form a single bread and drink as they participate in the Eucharist. The Christian is bread to feed the hungry neighbor and drink to quench the thirst: "Also with us it happens that we all become one cake and we eat each other," Luther explains. He compares the eucharistic eating to the baking of bread in which the ingredients get totally mixed without being able to be distinguished from each other; or the preparation of wine in which the grapes are mashed.[19]

Inasmuch as we receive the very real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, so too do those whom we accompany on their journey. For, "in, with, and under" the bread and wine of the sacrament, Christ is really present. As we receive our Lord's body and blood, we ourselves are filled with the accompaniment of the indwelling of Christ, becoming Christ-bearers[20] to those whose journey we join.

How is this accomplished? "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead *the Holy Spirit has called me*…."[21] That is a very large theological exception; indeed, by it, Luther claims a pneumatological Christology that is both Johannine and Pauline. That is, we bear Christ in our sacramental participation and we become Christ-bearers in our eschatological living only because the Holy Spirit, twice given to the community of faith—sent once to the disciples at Pentecost and secondarily to us in word and sacrament—enables life-giving transformation.

Nowhere is this transformation more boldly claimed within and to the holy assembly than in the Eucharistic Prayer, in which, after the anamnetic thanksgiving for God's saving actions, the community petitions God's "Holy Spirit to bless us, your servants, and these your own gifts of bread and wine, so that we and all who share in the body and blood of Christ may be filled with heavenly blessing and grace, and, receiving the forgiveness of sin, may be formed as your holy people…."[22] Such epicletic invocation (invocation of the Spirit) transforms not only bread and wine but me and my neighbor, so that thereafter not only do the ele-

[18]Ibid., 68.

[19]Kärkkäinen, "The Christian as Christ,"114.

[20]Cf. Alberto L. Garcia, "A Multi-Ethnic Lutheran Theology for the Next Generation: Toward a Theology of Accompaniment in the 21st Century," *Missio Apostolica* 12/2 (2004) 80–86.

[21]Martin Luther, *The Small Catechis*m, in *The Book of Concor*d, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 355 (emphasis mine.)

[22]Eucharistic Prayer I in *Evangelical Lutheran Worshi*p, 109.

ments/accidents bear Christ, but so too the faithful community—one holy assembly, united and abiding in God, that by the Holy Spirit my accompaniment of those who suffer and die is also the accompaniment of Christ.

Such is our response to the plaintive wail, even as it is Christ's call to act. As every holy assembly has lived the faith in a present between past and future, within the reign of God that is both now and not yet, by a salvation both promise and fulfillment, we do so as a community marked by epicletic eschatology—that is, we walk, we hold, we pray, we accompany, as we are enabled and enlivened by the Holy Spirit to live in this anamnetic moment, bearing salvation now ushered in, even as we participate in the eschatological drawing near of salvation's fullness.

Hope in Hospice

When the darkness appears and the night draws near,
and the day is past and gone,
at the river I stand, guide my feet, hold my hand.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.[23]

Last summer, my ninety-eight-year-old grandmother died. Her funeral was held within the community of faith in which she—like her son and his family (including her pastor granddaughter)—had been a part her entire life. As the family gathered at the entrance to the church, readying for this eucharistic celebration of Grandma's life in Christ, her great-granddaughter, my (then) six-year-old niece, knelt at the prie-dieu set before the coffin prior to its closing. As she crossed herself and moved her lips in prayer, tears streamed down her face. I knelt down beside her asking, "Are you okay?" Placing a finger to her lips, "Shh," she replied, "I'm talking to God, Jesus, and Great-Grandma." In this profound act of worship, separation ceases. Connection is made. Communion exists. Union happens.

Hope in hospice! ⊕

DEBORAH L. GEWEKE, DMin, is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She currently serves as chaplain at Hospice of Palm Beach County, Florida, as well as an adjunct professor of theology at Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida.

[23]Dorsey, "Precious Lord," stanza 3.