



December 15, 2020

## **Grace Comes in Strange Packages**

**By Dodd Sims, M.D.**

Earl died on Veterans Day. Actually, he died just a few hours short. His daughter called the office to let us know. She was hoping he would make it to Veterans Day. The boys at the VFW were bringing a certificate over to him at the nursing home. Even though he had been dying for weeks, she was hoping that he was ornery enough to last until then. She knew he would be pleased to get the certificate from the VFW.

She had to place him at a new nursing home south of here a few weeks earlier. The nursing home near my office reported he was a difficult patient. He didn't get along with the staff. He didn't follow instructions. He scared the other residents.

I'd been his doc for seven or eight years. There had been a ruckus in our office. Someone had walked right in the back door. He demanded to see a doctor. The nurses were trying to calm him. He had just been "fired" by the

practice upstairs for being a difficult patient. He wanted a new doctor. He wanted to see a doctor now and he wasn't leaving until he did. I stepped out into the hallway to see what was going on. I sat down with Earl in an exam room, and that was it. I was now Earl's doctor.

He really was difficult. He never came to an appointment on time. He showed up without appointments; insisted on being seen. He wore dirty clothes. He hadn't shaved in weeks. He quarreled with the receptionists. He quarreled with the nurses. Boy, was he difficult – and just plain ornery.

He had a bunch of kids. Two had died young. They were buried south of here. He often spent the night in the cemetery sleeping on the grass next to their graves. He kept an old blanket and a box of tinned food behind the gravestone. His children asked me to order him to stop sleeping in the cemetery. I told him, but he kept going there.

As he got older, his voice grew hoarse. He was asked to give up singing in the choir over at the Baptist church. He could no longer carry a tune. But he kept showing up for practice anyway. Finally, an off-duty cop in the choir "escorted" him out of the church. It hurt his arm. He went to the ER. The docs there called to tell me that he had sprained his shoulder. Earl was just plain ornery.

So why am I so saddened by his death? Unfortunately, I lose patients all the time. It's part of what I do. Why do I feel such a sense of loss? What was it that I got from Earl that I have now lost? It is grace. I received grace from Earl.

Grace comes in strange packages. The good writers know this. Flannery O'Connor knew this when she created her character the Misfit in her story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." A hard life had made the Misfit a hardened man. Her story invites us to look behind the rough exterior, to ponder what makes a good person good.

William Carlos Williams, a physician and poet, knew this when he wrote "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital." Even on his way to visit the dying at the height of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, he reminds himself, and us, to take the time to look for signs of spring.

The writers of our Bible certainly knew this. How can an old, rugged cross be such a powerful package of grace? How it can mean so many things, to so many people? How can the symbol of the cruel death of one man deliver hope to so many people for so many centuries?

But if we're not awake – if we're not spiritually awake – we'll miss it. We'll just see the misfits. We'll see the package, but not recognize the grace that God has tried to deliver to us.

Earl taught me this. He taught me to be patient and to listen, even when there seems to be no time. He taught me to wait in the expectation that we always have something to learn, even from the misfit. Because of Earl, I am a better person and a better doctor.

One reason we miss grace is, I think, that we tend to spiritualize the future instead of the here and now. When Mark 13:35 admonishes us to stay awake because we know not when the master will return, we think of Jesus returning and taking us up to heaven. But staying spiritually awake is more than this. It is also staying awake in the here and now so that we can recognize grace when it lands on our doorstep. We just need to open the package.

So, stay awake. Look for the grace, even in misfits. It is there in front of us. It may come in strange packages, but it is there. God delivers grace to all of us, but we need to stay awake and recognize it.

Earl, thank you for your service to our country. And thank you for the grace you brought to me. I will miss you, Earl. I sure will miss you.