

Though many of us have come to Mass for years, one question we might not ponder too often is do we know Jesus?

Sure we might say, I've gone my whole life.

But, if we are honest, there is the danger for our religion to become ritual, or something we don't think about too much as we get caught up in the busyness of our lives. We might not think about how we, like the mob in the Passion, reject the love of our Lord. Or we might not think about how we haven't come to know God as much as we should. Or, perhaps life has just been hard and we think "OK God, are you out there? Where are you in the midst of all of this?"

Years ago, Dr. James Brown, who went on to become a professor at Creighton University, confronted these questions of his faith when a young patient caused him to think more deeply about the nature of God.

He was an intern in pediatrics at the time, fresh out of medical school. A lot of facts and figures were crammed into his brain, but his clinical experience was somewhat limited. But, he says, that's what it means to be an intern.

One of his most memorable first patients was a young lady named Karen. She had been referred to their city hospital from a small community in North Carolina because of symptoms of weakness and anemia. Dr. Brown knew when he first met her that he was dealing with someone out of the ordinary. She was not the least intimidated by the title "doctor" or the white coat, and she always spoke what was on her mind. During their first interview, Karen wanted to know his credentials down to a tee, and wanted Dr. Brown to know that she knew that he was, indeed, "just" an intern. She was 14 years old and full of life.

Unfortunately, their evaluations revealed that she had a type of leukemia that was somewhat unusual, and not as responsive to different treatment modalities as were others types of leukemia. In fact, the prognosis for her surviving even one year was unlikely.

Chemotherapy was initiated, and Karen was never shy in telling the doctors how sick they were making her with the medicine. She never spoke in a mean way, but simply in a way that always made her feelings known. If they had difficulty with an IV, she would readily point out their incompetence. However, she would just as readily forgive them and compliment them when an IV was maintained in her fragile veins on the first try.

Remarkably, within three months Karen went into remission, becoming free of her disease. She continued to come in for routine chemotherapy. During those short visits, Karen and Dr. Brown became friends. It was almost uncanny how, during random rotations, he would turn up as her physician. Always when she would see him coming, she'd gasp, "Oh no, do I have to have Dr. Brown?" Sometimes she was kidding, sometimes she wasn't, but she always wanted him to hear her.

About a year after her original diagnosis, her disease returned. And when her type of leukemia returns, it would almost always be impossible to regain remission because of all the therapeutic modalities have already been spent. However, once again - remarkably if not miraculously - Karen went into remission. Dr. Brown was now a second year resident, a little more competent and quite a bit more attached to Karen's family. He continued to see Karen and her family over the next year and a half. She proceeded in her high school career and remained an outspoken, fun-loving teenager.

Dr. Brown was now in his chief residency year, spending his last month on the inpatient ward prior to completing his training. Karen came in once again with an exacerbation of her disease; she was very ill. There was involvement of every organ of her body, including her brain, and literally no other chemical agent to be tried. There was nothing they could do. Karen was made comfortable, given IV fluids and medication for pain. After long discussions, Karen's doctor and family decided that the goal would be to keep her comfortable and pain free. No unnecessary heroic measures would be performed to prolong the inevitable. In fact, there were no heroic measures left.

Karen soon slipped into a coma. After viewing the CT scan and seeing the diffuse brain involvement, it was easy to see why. They expected each day to be her last. Her eyes were fixed and nonresponsive, her breathing shallow. Her heart was still strong, as they knew it would be. However the disease was ravaging her blood system and brain, and there was evidence of opportunistic pneumonia involving both lungs. All knew she would soon die.

Dr. Brown began to have a tremendous dread of Karen dying while he was on call. He did not want to pronounce her dead. It came to the point where he hoped that her death would come on nights that he was away from the hospital, because he feared that he would not be any emotional support for the family, or that he would even be able to perform his duties as a physician. This family had come to mean a lot to him.

It was a Wednesday night, and Karen had been in a coma for four days. He was the chief resident on call for the wards, He spoke with the family and peeked in on Karen. He noticed her breathing was very shallow and her temperature quite low. Death could be imminent. He selfishly hoped to himself that maybe she'd wait until tomorrow to die. He went about his chores until about 3 a.m., when he finally tried to get some sleep. At 4 a.m. he received a STATe page to Karen's room. This puzzled him somewhat because they were not going to make any heroic interventions. Nevertheless, he ran to her room.

The nurse greeted him outside the room and grabbed his arm. "Karen wants to talk to you." He literally thought this nurse was crazy. He couldn't imagine what she was talking about - Karen was in a coma. At this point in his life, his scientific, Newtonian way of thinking rules his thoughts, primarily because this is the approach they are trained in day in and day out in medical school. He had neglected other, more important spiritual aspects of his being, ignoring the instinct that knows what reason cannot know.

He went into the room, and to his amazement, Karen was sitting up in bed. Her mother was on the left side of the bed, her father on the right. Dr. Brown stood next to her father not saying anything, not knowing what to say. Karen's eyes, which has been glazed over for four days, were now clear and sharp. She simply stated, "God has come for me. It is time for me to go." She then went around to each of her family and Dr. Brown at her bedside and hugged them tightly, one at a time. These were strong hugs, hugs that Dr. Brown kept thinking were impossible. He could only visualize her CT scan and the severe degree of brain damage. How could this be?

Then Karen lay down. But she popped back up immediately, as if she had forgotten something. She went around the bed to each of them again, with her penetrating eyes fixing their stares. No hugs this time. But her hands were strong and steady, squeezing everyone's shoulders as she spoke. "God is here," she said. "Do you see him? Do you know him?" Dr. Brown was scared. Nothing in his experience could explain what was happening here. There was nothing else to say, so he mumbled, "Yes. Good-bye. Thank you." He didn't know what to say. The entire time, he kept visualizing that CT scan. Then Karen laid back down and died - or he should say, she quit breathing and her heart stopped. Her powerful spirit went on living.

Dr. Brown says it was years before he could tell that story, even to his wife. Later on he still could not tell it without feeling overwhelming emotions. He knows that his experience isn't something to be understood through the limited viewpoint of the scientific realm. We are, he says, in essence spiritual beings in a spiritual universe, not primarily governed by Newton's laws but those of God.

Sometimes like Dr. Brown, we tend not to think of God not because we don't believe, but because we get caught up in day to day life. Other times God can be so hard to see. We suffer; people we care about suffer; and we see evil in the world. But if there were one statement to sum up Good Friday, I'd suggest it's in the three words Karen said before she died, "God is here," and if there were an action to describe what that looks like, it would be in what she did for the people in that hospital room, giving each an embrace before she breathed her last to let them know that they were loved.

Pope Francis once said, "every man is a story of love that God writes on this earth." Unfortunately sometimes we forget just how much we are loved. Sometimes we forget that God is with us. At this liturgy, we venerate the cross and we receive Communion. And as we do that, it's worth thinking about just how radical the love of God is. He knows what it's like to suffer as we do. He knows what it's like to be betrayed. He knows what it's like to lose people close to you; to have your heart broken when people turn their back on you. He knows physical and emotional anguish. Everything we go through as humans, Jesus goes through too. And the reason is to show us how much we are loved and how we are not alone.

The first part is to accept that love. To open up our hearts and to say "Lord, help me." Maybe you have fear or anxiety; maybe you are ashamed of some of the choices you've made; maybe you're hurting because of the decisions others have made around you.

Whatever it might be, realize when you look to the Cross, it is God's definitive statement that you and I matter.

The second part is ask ourselves both how we have - and have not - manifested that love. The Passion reveals on the one hand the evil of what man is capable of, but also the good in how we see what our Lord does. We've been working on things this Lent to try to become better, but this is life long. So what in our life do we battle, and what needs continued change. Naming things is hard; as I said yesterday it's not easy to have one's feet washed, to expose something that is normally covered up, but that's what we need to do with our sins no matter what they are. To call them to mind as we venerate this cross and to think about those things we do that we aren't proud of, and say "Jesus, help me become the person I can become because you have shown me the way."

And lastly, like with Karen, may the love of God flow through you and me. Karen brought joy to people around her, and she made Dr. Brown a better doctor, but more importantly, she made him a better human being by teaching him of the profound truth of God being with him. When God's love flows through us, we get involved in this world rather than giving up on it. We pray for one another. We give of our time to others. We challenge one another and help one another to grow. We stand up for what is right and speak to the truth. We do actions of love and mercy.

The night at times can seem so dark, but through it all, patiently there is our God - always there. And if you think of growing up and living around loved ones, sometimes we are filled with wonderful emotions and memories; other times we have things we would rather forget, because in all of us is the Peter who stood by Jesus and did in fact die for Him, and the Peter who denied Him three times. Jesus though never gave up on the apostles, and neither does He give up on us. The suffering they would go through, and the suffering we go through is so hard; some of it we inflict on others and ourselves; and some of it simply defies explanation and leaves us speechless. But this cross that we bow before today reminds us that death will never have the last word, but that life does. Leukemia took Karens body, but it could never touch her soul. As with her, Jesus comes to us and shows us how to live, and gives us the gift of Himself. Hopefully no matter what we are going through, it's a love we strive to see and let into our hearts, for indeed, God is here.