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1 Peter 4:8-11, New Living Translation.

⁸ *Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.* ⁹ *Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.*

¹⁰ *God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.* ¹¹ *Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.*

Praying for the chaplain.

I originally became a hospital chaplain as part of my training for ordination. I had no idea how much I would come to value being able to serve patients, family members, and staff. It's a true gift from God to be allowed into someone's life when they're at a crisis point, to hear their story, and to have an opportunity to comfort them, even if only in a small way. I'm a retired professor in the engineering school at the University of Colorado at Boulder and I used to solve concrete, many-faceted problems. I had to come up with real solutions; that means spending time, sometimes years, and there's significant long-term pressure that comes with doing this kind of work. But now, I'm blessed with an

opportunity to focus on one person at a time and to be present for that person.

There's no solution to find. I'm simply there to serve God's people in the moment. Sometimes I feel selfish being a chaplain. I think I often get as much or more out of a visit with someone than that person does. It's a spiritual event for me. That's what we're being told in Chapter 4 of 1st Peter: love cleanses us. It regenerates our souls. It brings us back into the arms of God.

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Before we dive deeper into this letter from the New Testament, I'd like to talk about a patient I visited some time ago. As always, I am changing details to protect her privacy. There are a couple of things I look for in a patient's chart before I go visit them. I'm not a medical person, but I do try to figure out in a rough sense how sick they are. I don't talk about medical issues with patients unless they do so first. But talking to someone who is facing a life-threatening illness is very different than talking to someone who is recovering after having a rod placed in a broken leg. I also look to see if there is a declared religion; in

Boulder, the most common religion is None. And I look to see where they live, only to see if their address is XXXX, meaning they are homeless. I'm always relaxed when I go into the room of a homeless person. They seem to always appreciate my visit.

In this case, the patient was a woman in Oncology; she was three years into treatment for a cancer that was not responding to treatment, and her religion was None. Her address had a lot of X's in it. I cleaned my hands with the sanitizer that is available outside every patient room. I knocked on her door, opened it slowly, and called out her name – which, by the way, I had no idea how to pronounce. She was sitting up in bed. She had long black hair. Next to her bed, on a small table, was a large backpack standing upright. And next to her in her bed were six or seven small, grubby stuffed animals. She smiled broadly as I walked up to her bed and said I was the chaplain. I told her that my name is Buzz, and that I was there to see how she was doing. She said "Hello, Bud"; she said it with a d, **Bud**, not with a double z as in my name, Buzz. Then she very politely told me how to pronounce her name. It's spelled "Bébhinn", with an accent on the e, and is pronounced something like "Byeh-vyin". (This is not her true name, but her name was similarly difficult to pronounce for an American). I did my best to repeat it back to her and I failed miserably. She smiled even more broadly

and said, “**Bud**, what can I do for you?” I noticed immediately that Bébhinn seemed to be missing most or all of the teeth on one side of her mouth.

I sat down and talked to her. Often, it’s clumsy, sometimes impossible, to get a patient to talk about their life. My goal is usually to listen to the person, and when they get to a painful point in their life story or in their telling of their medical journey, I make a point of simply listening. I did not have to prod Bébhinn. She spoke freely - and in a very literate, educated fashion. I heard that she had been born on a small farm in Ireland, that she and her sister had moved to America together as very young women, and that they both had gotten married in California. I learned that her husband had turned out to be a brutal man. “He broke my jaw, and knocked out half of my teeth,” she said, “so I had to run away”. Bébhinn told me that she had been advised to leave California, and to go to some place familiar to her, a place where she could see herself living, but where her husband had no connections. She had spent two days in the Boulder area on the way out from Ireland, and so she came to Colorado. She could not find a job, though, and ended up homeless. But Bébhinn eventually found a job in Wyoming, taking care of adults with cognitive disabilities. She loved the job because, she said, it was a gift to serve others. After being abused, it felt so good to open her heart to others and discover that she still had a huge heart.

However, she was forced to quit that job when her sister called. Her sister's husband had been killed suddenly in a motorcycle accident. Bébhinn's sister had a baby at the time and was beside herself with grief. Now, Bébhinn was a woman who had suffered a terrible injury at the hands of a man who should have held her wellbeing and happiness as his primary goal in life. She had finally established a life of her own. Now she was giving it all up to go back to California. But Bébhinn was only in her sister's home for a week before her sister suddenly decided that she would be okay, that she didn't need Bébhinn's help anymore. In fact, the sister explained, Bébhinn was no longer welcome in her home. When Bébhinn explained that she had no home or job to go back to, her sister didn't care. It turned out that the sister decided that Bébhinn, who was unemployed, homeless, and had a damaged face, was embarrassing to have around. Bébhinn went back to Boulder and never again found a home. She lived on the street for a while. Bébhinn eventually found a semi-permanent place to live in a shelter. Her life for a handful of years now had consisted of living in the shelter, with periodic stays in Boulder Community Hospital to be treated for a colon cancer that was refusing to be cured. But she had a home, she said with a smile, in that shelter. She constantly had to renegotiate with the folks who run the shelter to allow her to continue to stay, but it was a home.

The one thing she said to me at least three times was that most of the men on the street were good men who protected the women. She said that it was too bad that unlike the women on the street, it was hard for the men to find a long-term place to stay. I'm going to get back to Bébhinn in a moment.

There are two letters in the New Testament that are attributed to the Apostle Peter. Many people believe that the letter we are looking at today, 1st Peter, was written to provide spiritual and practical support for people who were undergoing violent persecution. The author is writing to people in Asia Minor, which today is more or less modern Turkey. These churches are made up of gentiles, not Jews who have joined the Jesus movement. Those folks live in the area around Jerusalem. Both letters state clearly that they are written by Peter, an Apostle of Jesus. Peter is a poor fisherman and yet the letters are written in very literate, cultivated Greek. In fact, our letter is written in a more sophisticated Greek than the Gospels and Revelation. It's also true that significant persecution against Christians didn't begin in this region until long after Peter would have been dead. The two Peter letters also don't highlight the fact that Peter knows Jesus personally. To complicate things further, the Greek in the two letters is different, and so the two letters appear to have different authors. And the second letter seems to imply that the age of the Apostles has passed; and

so, it would have been written after Peter was dead. In sum, most biblical scholars do not believe that Peter personally wrote either of these letters.

So, we are left with a letter that we must accept at face value. We do need to remember a longstanding tenet of biblical scholarship: the Bible, in particular, the New Testament, was written during a time when documents were often attributed to people, sometimes to honor them, sometimes to add more weight to the documents. What's true is that the two letters do seem to contain beliefs that would have been held by the true Peter. 1st Peter offers beautifully insightful advice on how a Christian can live a vibrant life dedicated to God even when facing extreme challenges. One of the key lessons of this letter is that we should always trust God, even when things aren't going well. This is especially true when we are facing bias simply because we are followers of Christ. This is something that all of us today can learn from: Christianity is out of vogue in America. Our passage today tells us to be proactive in our trust. We don't just sit around and think about how to show our love for God. We should get off the sofa and do something. We should serve others as a way of glorifying God and Jesus. This passage makes these important points: We must love one another and be very generous in doing so. We must serve one another with whatever gifts we have been given. God must be glorified through Jesus Christ in the things we do to

serve others. We are to give all our energy when we serve – and we have a lot of energy to give, because the grace and the power of our God is behind us.

Still, we are left to wonder who wrote this letter. In it, the author mentions that he is in Babylon, which is probably a reference to the pagan, corrupt city of Rome. It's thought that perhaps the letter was written by a follower of Peter, and that in fact, the concern isn't for literal, physical persecution against the churches in Asia Minor. Maybe the author is referring to life as a Christian in the Roman Empire or in any place where the secular society around us persecutes us socially and teaches us not to serve others, but rather to only serve ourselves.

Here's how my visit with Bébhinn ended. As our conversation wound down – and we talked for about an hour and a half – she asked if we could pray before I left. I said of course, yes. She reached out with her hands. I took them. She closed her eyes. I closed mine. I was preparing myself to start praying – when she started praying: “God please guide and protect **Bud** as he continues with his ministry in this hospital.” She continued on in this vein for a few minutes. Yes, I thought she wanted me to pray for her, which is what most patients ask for. But she prayed for me instead. That's what Bébhinn was all about - using whatever she had to serve others in the name of God. Despite all she had been through in her very tough life, she had so much to offer.

One last thing. There is a very intriguing verse that comes just before the passage we read today from 1st Peter. Before saying that we should love each other, the author says: *The end of the world is coming soon. Therefore, be earnest and disciplined in your prayers.* The author is saying that the end of time is approaching. After this line, the author delivers the passage that we have read. Does this mean that we should serve each other with all that we have simply because we're worried about facing God soon? That's not why Bébhinn prayed for me. Indeed, for her, all earthly things would soon end. She told me she was hoping to live to see the summer. That was two years ago. I thanked her for praying for me. I told her it was the most beautiful thing that any patient or family member had ever done for me. She told me I was welcome and that she prays for others because it is the best way to live a radiant life. She prayed for me for my sake – not to earn some reward from God. I'd like to end with a prayer.

God, we are unequal only in this world, and the day will come when all people are equal in all ways. Help us remember that the least successful, the least respected on this planet are often the ones who are the closest to you. We thank you for the gift that we will receive as a result of giving of ourselves – and this gift consists of radiant, vibrant lives filled with your grace and power. Amen.