

KITCHEN COUNTER MUSING

From Pastor Mark for Friday, August 15, 2025

WHAT IS CHURCH?

The secretary in the Emergency Department calls me on Friday night a few weeks ago. A woman is not going to live. Could I please, and I quote, “Call a priest or get in here yourself.” The patient is Catholic, so I call the on-call priest. Alas, this on-call priest has been “unavailable” before and, again today, he does not answer his phone the two times I call. Meanwhile the HUC calls me back to say that the family doesn’t care if the priest comes. They simply need spiritual support. “Mark, I know you were in here earlier today, but can you come over now?”

I go.

The patient is intubated, a mistake because the family said the patient was a “Do Not Resuscitate.” This takes a few moments to sort out but, because the patient is so clearly dying (the vent is doing ALL the breathing for the patient), the doctor agrees to extubate. As she and the respiratory therapist are removing the tube, the doctor turns to me and says, “Go get the family from the waiting room, she won’t last long.”

I brought the family in to say goodbye. They comment that her chest still shows some movement. The doctor explains that there is a very slow heartbeat, not enough to sustain life, but that the patient is not breathing. The daughter nods. We pray together. I recited the 23rd Psalm. I anoint the patient. The family talks about what they must do. I tell them the only thing they must do is call a funeral home. The daughter says she will call as soon as she gets home. They seem in a hurry to go now. I walk them to the exit of the ED. I hug the daughter goodbye. She thanked me. I spent a few moments with the public security officer who is also a minister.

And then I go back in to sit with the patient. After all, her heart was still beating.

But someone has beaten me to the bedside.

One of the nurses is holding the patient’s hand. She says that she doesn’t want the patient to die alone. I sat opposite her and take the patient’s other hand. We talk of introductory things (kids, school, etc...) as the patient’s heartbeat goes between 19 and 34. Then it drops. Then it flatlines. Then she is gone. The doctor comes in and pronounces.

She didn’t die alone. I am getting ready to leave. But before I do I call the priest who didn’t answer his phone. I told him we have taken care of the situation, and to have a good evening.

As I climb into my car it occurs to me that the ED nurse was the church for this woman because the church guy didn’t show up. I am reminded that “Church” is not a noun, but a verb. That nurse “churched” this woman into eternity, praise God, when the Church could not be available.

Worship takes so many forms. That night I was led in worship by a nurse I just met.

Grace and Peace,

Mark