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Letters from the Land of Cancer

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Letter #1

Monday, January 16, 2006

Friends: I'll tell the thing to you in story form ...

On December 26, while grocery shopping with my granddaughter Cassindra, I reached up to touch my neck in that hollow just above the left clavicle, where I found a good-sized mass. I can't remember what caused me to lift my hand. Surely no premonition. All my attention was on bread and the beautiful child beside me. Nor do I think I reached to investigate something. An itch. A new sensation. It was a common, unconscious gesture.

But within the instant I realized that I was stroking and measuring a new thing: soft tissue filling the hollow from the clavicular notch back to the beginning of my shoulder. Four inches long? Tucked deeper under the bone than I could feel.

Mildly, I wondered if it were a tumor. Or why else was cushion there? Still pushing the grocery cart, aware of Cassindra ... If it were a tumor, what then?

By good fortune all of our children, their spouses and our grandchildren had gathered at our house for Christmas.

As soon as I'd returned home I took Thanne aside and asked her to touch this thing in my neck. She took it very seriously. We called Dr. Keith Gingerich, our family doctor, and in less than two hours he was examining me. This was a Monday afternoon.

"One of two possibilities," he conjectured. It was a swollen lymph node. Either the node was trying to evacuate an internal infection, or the node was a lymphoma.

Dr. Gingerich didn't hesitate. He sent me directly to Porter Hospital for an X-ray and a CT scan. I went home. Thanne and I said nothing to the others. We didn't know how long we'd have to wait.

As a matter of fact, the very next day I ran into the doctor just outside his offices. He'd asked the radiologist to read the pictures immediately. What usually takes three days had taken but one. We didn't even go into Gingerich's offices. Standing outside in the wintry afternoon, he said, "It looks suspicious. The doctor tells me he's found two other masses in your chest. Likely it's a lymphoma."

That was Tuesday. Wednesday after we had eaten supper, Thanne and I sent away the grandchildren while their parents stayed at the table with Thanne and me. She let me do that talking.

Letter #1

I felt no urgency. It didn't seem as if I were peering into a bleak darkness. Rather, I spoke slowly, choosing my words in order to offer the thing as plainly as possible.

Only one of our four children has never married. Matthew, in his mid-thirties. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where he works as the manager of a restaurant. At table on that Wednesday evening he was sitting to my left.

Even as I've written the sequence here for you, so I told it to the children:

Very likely a cancer. In my neck, in the lower part of my left lung, and another underneath my sternum, crossing from lung to lung.

"I'm not afraid," I said to them. "I think of this—whatever is to come, I think of it as an adventure."

In fact, even when I was a pastor sitting with those who were dying, I had begun to characterize my own dying as an "adventure."

"I mean, I'll get to experience things I've never experienced before. It's like traveling to Africa or Japan. Except that this trip will finally leave the world altogether."

I genuinely meant what I was saying. And I meant it to comfort the family. They bent their faces to the table. Catherine, Joseph's wife, gazed directly at me, her eyes steadfast and glittering. Thanne scanned our children to see how they were taking the news. Matt had put his forehead down on the table and covered the back of his neck with his hand.

Perhaps the image didn't have the effect I wanted. Maybe I

made too much of the end of my adventure. Because when we had prayed, when everyone else rose up from the table, Matthew kept his head down, his shoulders hunched.

Then, suddenly, he rose up and walked to the bathroom, shut and locked the door, and there he stayed.

The kitchen was busy. The light bright, dishes cleaned with rubber spatulas, pots and pans rattling. But Matthew didn't come out. Thanne and I looked at each other.

This is the little boy who grew restive whenever I had to be gone from home overnight. More than three nights and Matt could scarcely abide my absence and the brokenness of the family whole.

After about a half hour I knocked on the bathroom door and said, "Matthew, come out. Take a walk with me."

He did. He came out and put on his coat; I, my boots and a thick coat too. The night was cold, the ground dusted with snow.

We walked side by side in silence. The dusk-to-dawn light illumined our going. Thanne and I live in the country.

Finally I talked. "Matt, whatever happens, if ever I have to leave the work to your mother, would you take over?"

He kept his mouth closed. We kept walking.

"You are the most free. You are the best one—the only one—whom I can ask. Will you take care of Mom for me?"

Softly he indicated agreement.

We hugged.

ON FRIDAY OF THAT SAME week, just four days from discovery, Thanne and I met with a chemical oncologist, Dr. Mary Klein.

Letter #1

She wrote an order for a PET scan and then a biopsy by the general surgeon, Dr. Cooper. The PET scan took place soon enough. But I couldn't get an appointment with the surgeon until the following Thursday, January 5. Once he had examined my lump, he scheduled me for surgery the very next day, Friday, January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. More than a simple biopsy, he removed altogether the mass in my neck.

One week later we returned to Dr. Cooper.

I have, he told us, a metastatic cancer. That is, the cancers in my lymph nodes are not the primary source. They've metastasized from somewhere else in my body, most probably from the littlest tumor in my left lung.

THIS AFTERNOON, THE 16TH, THANNE and I will drive to Chesterton to meet with Dr. Klein again. She'll talk about therapies. We have already (well, Thanne has) called the children to let them know what we know.

To add to the complications: I've just had four molars surgically removed. Dr. Lisa Shideler tells me that she can often sense the presence of a cancer before others know it, because trouble with teeth seems to be symptomatic. The molars had to be removed before anything like chemotherapy or radiation or my lowered white cell blood count might permit new infections. Chewing has become an acrobatic twisting of the tongue.

OKAY. THIS IS WHERE WE are right now. All these things are harder on Thanne than they are on me. Her waiting and the

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weight upon her shoulders outreaches mine. And those who don't have the disease yearn deeply to take it from their beloved—but they can't. They can only watch.

I promise you, I am at peace. We have a wonderful community surrounding us here in Valparaiso, both the town and our church and the university. And my faith, despite so much I do not know, looks forward to the Kingdom.

Peace. Peace to all of you. There is little enough of peace in the world right now. Let it be, then, in our hearts. We are not of the world. We are of the angels who wished peace upon everyone when the Messiah was born.

Walt