

On putting your hand to the plow and not looking back

By [Diane Roth](#)

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After church on Sunday, I got ready to go on vacation. But first, I wanted to visit a parish member who is in the hospital.

She is in the hospital for an extended stay. She is getting a stem cell transplant.

I don't talk in detail about medical conditions. First, for reasons of confidentiality. Second, because medicine is not my field, and I would not want to get something wrong. But people in our community know and love this woman well. When I said she was in the hospital, a few people knew what she was doing, even though I didn't tell them.

When I visited her the first time, she tried to explain some of the procedures that would take place, what would be happening, the timeline and the things they expect to see over the time she is there. She tried to explain the places where there was danger, and where the opportunities for healing as well. Medicine can work miracles sometimes, but those miracles are not without risks. Maybe it has always been so.

On Sunday, I brought the bulletin from church with me. Lately we have been printing everything: music, liturgy and lessons. I brought the bulletin and read the gospel and tried to summarize my sermon. My sermon wasn't based on the gospel reading, but somehow the image of putting our hand to the plow and not looking back seemed to have a connection.

On Tuesday, at Lectio Divina, we had struggled with the gospel reading. It was difficult for my little group of listeners to glean from. Jesus seems to be dissuading people from following him. He is hard on those who want to get some other task done before they put their hand to the plow.

It's hard work, following Jesus. And it's singular work. You can't be distracted by other things and expect to follow Jesus. When the ground is hard, when the plow doesn't seem to move, perhaps you have regrets and think you should have chosen some other kind of life.

So, I was visiting in the hospital with this woman, who is just a little into a long course of treatment, a treatment that she hopes and trusts will be healing. And I looked at her and suddenly I thought,

*She has put her hand to the plow and is not looking back.*

In fact, she told me, she can't look back. Once you begin the treatment, you have to go through it. You have to go ahead.

And I thought, perhaps that is what Jesus is talking about. It's not a choice. Once you put your hand to the plow, you can't look back. The course of treatment has begun. There is no way but forward.

So, you put your hand to the plow and you look at the far horizon, the one with three crosses and an empty tomb, the one with the gleaming city and the vision of God with us. You put your hand to the plow and you look at the horizon where the blind will see, and the dead will be raised, and the broken will be healed, and the hungry will be fed.

It's not a choice, really. Your only hope, and trust, is there, on that horizon. Every strain of the plow is done in that hope, and in that trust.

The course of treatment has begun. The healing is not in our hands. It never has been.

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