

What keeps you going?

After our time in the pediatric cardiac ICU, we brought home a healthy baby. Others made funeral plans.

by [Jake Owensby](#)

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When we returned to the room, my daughter was sitting up in bed. Puffy—her lovingly battered stuffed rabbit—was tucked under one arm. She was sipping apple juice from a straw. A Barney video was playing on the TV. And every nurse on duty in the pediatric cardiac ICU surrounded her bed, laughing and clapping.

At 18 months, our daughter had undergone open heart surgery. At her physician's direction, we had left the room while they took her off the ventilator.

The weeks-long buildup to the surgery, the hours of waiting for the procedure to be over, and finally the helpless agony of watching our daughter's terrified eyes plead with us to remove the tube from her throat had left us knackered. The relief and the joy we felt at seeing her holding court with those nurses was a welcome contrast to the dread and the emotional nausea wrought by the ordeal up to that point.

My wife told one of the nurses how kind it was of them to turn that moment into a celebration. The nurse responded with something like this: "Oh no, we did that as much for us as for her. You see, most of our patients are so little and so sick. The surgeries don't often turn out this well. Celebrating her result helps keep us going."

Until that exchange, my attention had been narrowly focused on my daughter. I had been oblivious to our surroundings. At the nurse's words I looked around as if seeing where I was for the first time. All around us lay frightfully tiny babies hooked up to all manner of machines.

Ashen-faced parents sat silently by their sides. Drained. Exhausted. At the edge of despair. Many of these babies would not leave this unit. Others would go home only to face still more surgeries, chronic physical limitations, and short lives.

Scores and scores of people had joined us in prayer for our daughter. We were and remain profoundly grateful for her swift recovery and robust health. And yet I was made aware that day that many of those parents had been praying for their children with every fiber of their being. So too had their friends and families.

They were just like us. Leaning on God to get us through the awful prospect that our child might die. We brought home a healthy baby. Others made funeral plans.

I have no simple explanation for this. Actually, I have no explanation at all. I'm a bishop, and some people may gasp to hear me—or to hear any follower of Jesus—say such a thing. For some, this will sound like a lack of faith. But I see it as the acknowledgment that mystery is at the core of faith.

We live in a messy world. A mix of justice and injustice. Beauty and horror. Love and cruelty. Scripture tells us, and Jesus repeatedly tells us, that God wants justice.

Now justice does not mean merely that God wants good people to be rewarded and bad actors to be punished. Justice means much more than that. Justice is shalom, God's dream of love and peace fully realized on earth as it is in heaven.

This is justice: Babies are born healthy and live long, rewarding lives. We share the fruits of this earth with each other so that no one goes hungry, lacks medical care, or sleeps under a bridge. We find strength in differences of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity instead of using them to judge each other or to build walls. Everyone receives love and respect. Nobody is any better than anybody else.

And there lies the tension. That is God's dream. This is our messy world. And so where is God?

Jesus challenges us to sit with this tension by telling the parable of the unjust judge. You know the one. There's a corrupt, self-serving judge notorious for padding his own pockets and pursuing his own interest at the expense of, well, pretty much everybody else.

A woman petitions this judge for justice. Initially, he ignores her. But her persistence is Guinness Book of World Records stuff. She texts him, hounds him on social media,

turns up at his doorstep, throws pebbles at his bedroom window, and loiters outside his office door. Finally, he grants her petition just to get her off his back.

Obviously, God is not the self-absorbed jerk that this judge represents. And it looks as if Jesus is going to say that if a guy like this will give you what you want for your persistent prayer, surely you can count on the loving God. Right? Pray hard and long enough and you'll get what you want.

But here's a news flash. God is not a vending machine, and prayers are not coins we stuff in the slot to get the candy we want. And just in case you don't get the point, Jesus tosses out this gem: "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?"

Um, well, actually Jesus, we are crying out to God day and night. And as a matter of fact there's been quite the delay. Like, you know, centuries upon centuries of delay. Suffering and sorrow litter the planet. Why doesn't God fix it?

I can't tell you why. And this parable doesn't explain it. But this is what Jesus says. That is to say, this is what it means that there is a Jesus at all.

God dwells in this world with us. Right now. Just as it is and just as we are. In sorrow and in joy. In suffering and in ecstasy. This is love. Eternal and infinite love in us and between us and around us. In this there is the promise of healing. And that is what keeps me going.

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