

Present in our loss (John 10:22-30)

How did faith and medical science become, for some people, mutually exclusive?

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In my role as a hospital chaplain, I'm often asked to talk with families that endorse a strong personal sense of faith but rebuff all conversation with their medical teams dealing with death.

All too often, I am faced with exasperated practitioners who try to explain to families the gravity of their loved one's illness, only to hear something like, "I'm believing the word that by his stripes they will be healed"—and that any word to the contrary is speaking death and any efforts to promote comfort are tantamount to killing their loved one. This stance closes all conversation, any bridge between the team and family members, leaving me sometimes discouraged but also puzzled.

I wonder what the family members have heard or read to bring them to such a conclusion, that the medical staff and faith community have to be adversaries and not allies. How did faith and medical science become, for some people, mutually exclusive? (This was a problem long before COVID-19 came to town.) Are the scriptures unclear in this regard? Or are we not listening closely enough?

In our Gospel reading, the Jewish leaders ask Jesus to state plainly whether or not he is the Messiah. He has been on the scene doing miraculous works and challenging the values and practices of the religious elite for several years by this point. It's not that Jesus is not explaining himself but that what he is explaining is a challenge to

their authority.

When pressed, the religious families I work with often concede that they want their loved one to stay alive mostly so they can avoid the pain of loss and change—even if this means their loved one can no longer perform any functions of daily life on their own. The religious leaders of Jesus' day also struggle to imagine change, to see life revolving around anything other than what they are already used to—a system that tended to benefit the leaders more than the led. Jesus is modeling a different way to lead, a different way to love.

When asked to pray with these families, I often pray for the Holy Spirit to comfort them in the realization that death is not a low point, or a battle lost, but a part of our faith that bridges us all from one life to the next. John's Gospel goes on to speak of a place prepared for all who believe (chapter 14). The promise of enduring and abiding relationship will be fulfilled, because Jesus and his Father are working together to redeem the world and us with it. The family's loved one is part of the kingdom of God, which has no end.

The Good Shepherd never promised earthly immortality. Just the abiding presence of one who is willing to endure the pain of death out of love for us.