

THE QUALITY OF MERCY

In the “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare, Portia, a brilliant Shakespearean heroine, impersonates a lawyer and pleads that mercy be granted a debtor in default to an abused money lender who is demanding a rather gruesome repayment. Portia pleads that the quality of mercy is greatest when given freely and that mercy must have some weight on the scales on justice.

Leaving Martin Luther King Day and headed into Presidents Day, my thoughts return to a decades old episode in my life where similar words and sentiments of Shakespeare, Dr. King and President Lincoln resounded.

Tom was a new Air Force sergeant with a mass in his chest. Almost everyone was convinced of the diagnosis. However, as I had often preached, “Although tumor is the rumor, tissue is the issue”. Thus, a surgical biopsy was scheduled.

Garrison Keillor, of Prairie Home Companion fame, would be proud of this young Minnesotan sergeant. How Tom got to be noble and gracious at such a young age, I do not know, but this kid was something special.

The surgery went well. The biopsy looked extremely bizarre under the microscope but our best pathologist was enormously confident about Tom’s rare diagnosis. Something about that pathologist gnawed at me. Nonetheless, as we had a direction, I sat with the gracious Sergeant and explained the intense therapy that lay ahead, the consequences of certain sterility and the high risk of permanent organ damage and possible death.

The therapy almost killed the patient. Many organ systems were severely damaged, perhaps permanently. Yet this young man’s spirit only strengthened. When he was strong enough to speak in his many trips to the intensive care unit, his first words were always questions about how the other “older patients with families” were doing!

After Tom’s last treatment, I received a hysterical call from our best pathologist. Between sobs he told me how confident he had been about Tom’s diagnosis so he did not check on all the special studies I requested. My colleague was wrong. Tom’s tumor was an unusual variant of a highly treatable type of cancer. Although the mass was apparently gone, the drugs he received had never been tried before and Tom would not survive more therapy. The pathologists’ wife had suddenly shown severe mental health problems. His family was falling apart. His desire to “save somebody” clouded his judgment.

I had to talk to Tom. I told him everything,

Tom understood and solemnly said, “We have to fix this”. Moist eyed, he searched my face and asked, “Is he going to be all right?” He grabbed his IV poles like the arms of a helping comrade. He lifted himself out of bed and said he had to see the hospital commander “to tell him to forgive the pathologist and to remember all the good he has done and will do.” I thought Tom could not walk; perhaps grace carried him to the commander as I could no longer see clearly through my own tears.

After over a decade of research, the previously untried treatment given by mistake was shown to be highly effective. The hospital commander, who was merciful in helping the pathologist recover, became Surgeon General of the USAF and personally saved lives and commanded rescue efforts on 9/11 when a hijacked plane crashed into the Pentagon

near his office. Tom survived. He is home in Minnesota working as a union steward with his five children; three are adopted from Ethiopia. Two are his.

Portia was right. Mercy is not forced, “it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven... it is twice blest...it blesses him that gives and him that takes”. President Lincoln and Dr. King knew that mercy has some weight on the scales of justice; so should we. The time is coming when someone will owe you what they can not pay.

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