

Agnus Dei

Like many really good hospitals, Tallahassee Memorial offers a program called “Clinical Pastoral Education.” Many denominations require their candidates for ordination to take at least one unit of “CPE,” as it is known in the trade. The program provides an opportunity for folks to practice ministry in clinical settings under supervision by an experienced chaplain. CPE students tend to get thrown into the deep end of the pool, and when they climb out, they are required to reflect on their experience with a small group of their peers.

CPE can be brutal. It can also be enlightening.

Occasionally I am invited to lead a discussion with the CPE students, and when I do, I like to bring along one of my very favorite TV characters – Chaplain Julia from the T.V. series “ER.”

Chaplain Julia arrives at County General Hospital rather late in the series. She’s in her 30’s. She’s stylish, creative, intelligent, and, it must be said, sexy. (This is TV, remember.)

More than anything else, Chaplain Julia is “cool.” She has studied Native American spirituality. She has spent time in an ashram. She knows her way around Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and several other world religions. She’s a one-stop, all-inclusive, name-your-preference kind of chaplain – just the kind of chaplain TV Land loves. (And did I mention that she’s sexy?)

Julia makes Father Mulcahy, the chaplain on the old series M*A*S*H, seem like the oldest and fuddiest of old fuddy-duddies. Father Muchay, you might remember, spoke with a stained-glass voice, wore nerdy glasses and a clerical collar, and was about as sexy as a cold shower.

When the series was still on the air, I was entranced by Chaplain Julia, but in the episode I show to the CPE students, Chaplain Julia crashes and burns. A man is brought in to the Emergency Room, suffering from hypothermia, having just dragged a drowning boy out of Lake Michigan. His name is Dr. Norman, and it turns out that he used to be a physician in the state penitentiary.

One of Dr. Norman’s official duties was to administer the drugs used in executions. In the course of the episode, we learn not only that Dr. Norman is dying of cancer, but is also plagued by a guilty conscience. He once botched the execution of a convicted murderer. The

lethal cocktail of drugs didn't work the first time, and he had to administer them all over again.

The young man on the execution gurney died a prolonged, excruciating death as his pregnant wife looked on. A few days later, a policeman confessed that he had framed the young man. Turns out, the man Dr. Norman executed hadn't murdered anyone after all.

Dr. Norman tells Chaplain Julia that he is in hell. He has spent years performing acts of contrition, seeking out the families of all the men who had died at his hands. He bought a car for the family of one executed prisoner. He sent another's son to college. He has done everything he can to earn forgiveness from God, but has yet to find peace.

"What do I have to do?" Dr. Norman demands to know from the chaplain. "What does God want me to do?"

Chaplain Julia assumes the role of a guru and suggests that perhaps Dr. Norman finds it easier to live without forgiveness than to live with it. "What the hell does that mean?" Dr. Norman wants to know.

Julia can't answer. The truth is, she doesn't have a clue what she's talking about. All Julia can do is deflect her client's feelings and bounce them back at him.

"Tell me!" he demands.

"You're upset," she replies.

"I know I'm upset! Tell me how to be forgiven."

"I understand . . ."

"No you don't. Tell me!"

After several such exchanges, Dr. Norman throws Chaplain Julia out of the room. "Get me somebody else," he screams. "Get me a real chaplain. Get me somebody who will tell me the truth."

Julia leaves the room in tears. Later Dr. Pratt pleads with her to come back and try again. She refuses. She admits that, professionally speaking, she doesn't have anything to offer this man. "I thought my all-inclusive approach would be helpful," she admits. "Now I realize that patients in crisis are looking for something else."

I admit it. I took far too much pleasure in watching Chaplain Julia's downfall. I found myself rooting for the patient the whole time. "That a boy! You tell her! Give her what for!" I haven't had so much fun since Union Seminary beat Columbia Seminary in a touch football match.

The script writers were pretty hard on Chaplain Julia. They set her up for a fall. They boxed her into a situation in which she was required to give testimony to her own faith, and guess what? She couldn't do it. She can't bear witness to the faith within her because the only thing within her is a collection of spiritual odds and ends. Julia has dipped her toe in several faith traditions, but she doesn't stand in any of them.

So, when push comes to shove, Chaplain Julia has nothing to offer this tortured soul who longs for peace. She can't even point away from herself to someone who can provide the answer to Dr. Norman's question.

Julia, I realize, is a fictional character. In real life, few chaplains are as sexy as she is, or as thoroughly noncommittal. I don't fault her for not giving what she doesn't have to give, but I do wish she'd have asked someone else to have a talk with poor Dr. Norman.

She might have asked the prophet Isaiah whose glorious poetry appears in today's first reading. He'd have told Dr. Norman about a God who not only forgives sins, but whose salvation extends to **"the end of the earth."** Isaiah could have pointed Dr. Norman toward the God who remains faithful, even when we are faithless, toward the God who, through his chosen servants, shines **"a light to the nations"** (Is. 49:6).

Unlike Chaplain Julia, Isaiah knows nothing of political correctness. He stands unapologetically in the tradition of ancient Israel. But at least he takes a stand. I think he might have said to Dr. Norman, "Forgiveness is not yours to earn. It's for God to give. You are right to be contrite. God does not take kindly to humans who try to take God's place. It's not for you to decide who should live and who should die. On the other hand, you'd be surprised how far God's graciousness can reach."

Or Julia might have invited the Apostle Paul to make a pastoral visit to Dr. Norman. Paul might have told him about his own career as a government official who thought he was doing the right thing.

"I used to put innocent men, women, and children in prison," Paul might have said. "I have blood on my hands, too. There is no way I could make amends for the wrong I did as a persecutor of the church. But God snatched me by the scruff of my neck and made an apostle out of me – an apostle of the good news of Jesus Christ, who died and lives for the likes of you and me. You say you are in hell. I was in hell and I didn't even know it. **But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain**" (I Cor. 15:10).

Paul will never be credentialed by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education. His technique is far too directive, and he talks too much. But at least he would have an answer to give to Dr. Norman. "Stop trying to earn forgiveness," he might tell him. "It can't be done.

As I wrote to those knuckleheads in Ephesus, **‘By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8)’**”

Or Chaplain Julia might have called in for a consultation the most famous witness of all: John the Baptist himself.

He’d have come tramping right out of today’s Gospel reading, tracking Jordan River mud all over the floor of the E.R. I can see him in his camel hair coat and leather belt, striding past the security guards and bursting into the treatment room. With a long, bony finger he’d have pointed straight to Jesus and said, **“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me’”** (John 1:29).

Behold the Lamb of God. Behold the answer to the question, “How could I possibly be forgiven?” Behold the **“light to the nations,”** envisioned by Isaiah, the fleshly proof of God’s love for the whole world.

This, beloved, is who Jesus is, according to the Bible and a great cloud of witnesses that extends from John’s day right up to our own. This is the one to whom the martyrs pointed as they went to their deaths. This is the one to whom Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed as his assassin drew a bead and pulled the trigger. This is the one to whom the creeds point and in whom all of creation rejoices.

Acknowledged or not, worshipped or not, honored or not, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

I don’t expect fictional characters like Chaplain Julia to point in Jesus’ direction when asked by a patient where to look for forgiveness, or love, or faith or anything else. Chaplain Julia, like a lot of real-life people, has convinced herself that it’s not cool to point to Jesus. What concerns me is that there seem to be so many real-life Christians who don’t like to point to Jesus, either.

Why the reluctance? Perhaps we don’t point to Jesus because we don’t want to be associated with the kind of Christianity that denigrates and demeans people of other faiths. I’m probably not the only person in this room who is embarrassed by the exclusivist claims of folks who call themselves evangelicals. Isn’t that all the more reason for people like you and me to bear a witness that is respectful?

Perhaps we don’t point to Jesus because we are aware how far short of his example our own lives fall. Doesn’t that kind of honesty make our witness all the more credible?

Perhaps we don't point to Jesus because we think we have to have all the answers ourselves before we point others in his direction. What strange logic that is. Surely, if you're pointing toward him, you're no longer pointing toward yourself.

The great Sri Lankan evangelist D. T. Niles famously told the *New York Times* "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." You don't have to have all the answers yourself in order to point toward the Bread of Life. All it takes is hunger and a taste of the bread that satisfies.

Years ago a couple came to me wanting to be married in this church. I sat down with them and we talked for quite a while. A few days later the bride-to-be came to see me on her own. She had a copy of the wedding service from the *Book of Common Worship* in her hand. "My fiancé is O.K. with this," she said, "but I've got a problem."

"Oh? What's the problem?"

"Well, quite frankly, the problem is Jesus. He's mentioned far too many times in this service. I want my wedding to be inclusive."

"So do I," I told her. "That's why Jesus is in there – to keep your wedding inclusive."

I didn't convince her, and she decided to get married at the Country Club instead. It's a shame, really. As the Gospel of John points out, Jesus can be a very helpful wedding guest. (Actually, I'm pretty sure he was there. He has a way showing up, invited or not.)

A Christian's job is to point to Jesus. It is to say, in whatever language communicates best to a broken and hurting world, "**Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**" Behold the inclusive God whose love includes even you and me.

Chaplain Julia couldn't point to the Lamb because, for her Jesus just one more metaphor among others. John Anderson, a former Moderator of the General Assembly used to say, "The Good News can't happen *through* you until it happens *to* you."

But isn't that why you're here? To taste? To see? To point?

Taste and see that the Lord is good. (Ps. 34:8). Then go from this place and point toward the Lamb.