For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. --Heb. 11:10

Cathedrals

Massive stone upon stone, from pier to column to arch to buttress, from sill beam to vault to spire—the primary direction of a cathedral is up↑. Yet the first direction most people look when they enter through the front portal is horizontal →. They stand in the narthex (the atrium just inside the front door) and look across the nave to the chancel, to the choir beyond that. They want to see if a service is in session. From a quiet alcove I’ve watched them. I do the same. I suppose the first interest of a human being is another human being. We want to see what is going on with other people. Or are we alone there?

Whether there is a service in session or not, whether anyone waits in the nave or presides past the crossing in the chancel, our next gaze is always upward. I’ve watched them. I do the same. Despite the centuries of strife and political intrigue, despite the bad faith and abuse of power by those en cathedra, when the cathedral now stands empty as a cavern, nearly all who come through that door still seem to sense that they are not alone, and their eyes are drawn toward heaven. Why?

Well, I propose that more than anything we sense God’s presence and are drawn to look inward and upward, as the Apostle Paul wrote: “for they demonstrate the effect of a law operating in their own hearts.” I contend that it has to do with Faith.

As you might imagine, I have a few stories about Faith. Actually I have a lot of stories about Faith, even narrowing it down to those that have happened this past year. But I only have room for a few.

………………

Je le pansay, Dieu le guerit --Ambroise Paré

This statement, in medieval French, means, “I bound him [(his wound], God healed him.” It was spoken by Paré (1517-1590), the father of modern trauma surgery. “I bound his wound, and God healed him” was his response after being praised for successfully treating a gravely injured young cavalry officer. It was also the motto by which he lived. It is still inscribed above his chair at the College de St. Cosme, the prestigious French medical college that refused to even consider Paré’s application to study there when he was merely a young provincial barber from Le Maine. I wish I had space to tell you more of Paré. He was a remarkable man of faith and courage, of keen intellect and uncommon sense. But this is not about Paré. It is about binding wounds and faith. I’ll try to present things in the order in which it usually happens: first the wounds, then the faith.

And Jesus said unto him, Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. --Mark 10:52

About a year ago, José Armando was lying in his hammock up above Trujillo. Trujillo is a historic little town about 50 miles from here as the crow flies…. if the crow flew straight over the San Antonio mountain range. The road from Loma de Luz goes around the long way and takes about three hours to drive if you have a private car, and a lot longer on the local buses. J.A.’s attacker, apparently high on cocaine and intending to rob the house, swung a sharp machete through J. A.’s wrist,
severing tendons, bones, arteries and nerves, nearly amputating it. The only structures left holding the hand onto the proximal wrist were the radial artery & nerve, the radial articulation, the thumb abductors and extensors, and some of the finger extensor tendons. He was seen at his local public hospital where the skin was sutured to hold his hand on, and nothing else was done. They apparently didn’t even remove a remarkable amount of dirt, twigs, leaves and grass before they closed the skin over it. From Trujillo he was sent to the next public hospital up the chain (in La Ceiba) and from there to the largest public health hospital in the country, where they wanted to amputate his hand. Somewhere along the line, he had heard about Loma de Luz, so instead of accepting the amputation he showed up in our E.R. about a day after the injury.

Finding, identifying, and putting back together 28 named structures (bones, tendons, arteries and nerves), the surgery alone took me about 5 hours. That is a fair amount of wound binding. I had enough faith that I expected the hand to survive, and hopefully someday with a lot of time, work, and physical therapy it might become somewhat functional. But apparently, as I later learned, J.A. just believed it was going to work right off. On the first dressing change a couple of days after surgery, I was pleased that the repaired ulnar artery had good flow through it. And, it is always a wonder to see tendons working again, if only that little bit of movement which can be allowed at first. But I must admit that when I did a cursory neurologic exam, at first I didn’t believe it. So I repeated it more thoroughly and carefully. After repeating the neurologic exam 3 times, I was still somewhere between doubt and a dawning eerie sense of awe that something very unusual was happening, because J.A. had had immediate and complete return of all function of those divided nerves. This would be like finding an electric lamp on with the cord unplugged. I had two other clinicians examine the hand (without telling them what I had found) and both reported a normal neurologic exam of the hand. That is not how it works.

You see, 2 of those “28 named structures” I had put back together were the median nerve and the ulnar nerve--2 out of 3 of the main nerves supplying the hand. Before surgery he was clearly completely insensate in the median & ulnar distribution, as he should have been. That is how it works. But that morning, two days post-op, he had essentially a normal sensory exam of this hand. This is not how it works. No, after the division of a nerve there is immediate cessation of function of that nerve beyond the injury. Even after a very good repair and under ideal circumstances (nerve ends sitting for 24 hours in dirt, leaves, and grass does not qualify as “ideal circumstances”), the nerve beyond the repair does not recover function; instead, it must re-grow down the endoneurial channel of the old nerve (at the rate of about an inch per month) for function to return. What occurred with the healing of J.A.’s wrist and hand was definitely not “natural.”

As best I can tell, J.A. had Faith that God was going to heal his hand….and so, lo and behold, He did. When I explained to him what a remarkable thing had happened and Rosanne asked him why he thought God chose to heal him this way, the answer from this simple country man was one that should stop the mouths of the greatest theologians. He said, “For His Glory.”

The last time I saw José Armando in clinic, some months into recovery, my note describes the excellent result overall and ends with “I put the parts back together but God healed him, & the (ongoing complete) function of the median & ulnar nerves is... miraculous.” The most reasonable explanation I can come up with is that God honored his faith…and healed him. In that sense I’m here to testify that Faith heals.

For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. --Romans 1:17

E.A. is a good natured & well-liked local boy from Lucinda. Most people thought of him as “Paleto,” the kid who sells Yuca root from a wheelbarrow. “Paleto” is the nickname that everyone calls him in Lucinda. It sort of means both “redneck” and “tough as a stick” at the same time. One year ago today Paleto was 21 years old & had gotten a job as the assistant to a local bus driver. He was hanging out of the bus door, as they all do, got a call on his cellphone & was fumbling with his phone, as we all have, and fell under the back wheels
of a fully loaded bus, as I hope none of us ever will. The driver and about 30 very upset, sweaty and dusty passengers brought him directly to the Emergency Room where resuscitation was begun. If I don’t make the point with every patient’s story, let me stop right here and make it clear that there is no Superman or Lone Ranger in any of these stories. Every patient we care for at Loma de Luz requires the expert, dedicated and compassionate care of many people. I write more about cathedrals when I try to tie together the disparate strings of this essay. Cathedrals are never built by any one person. It takes hundreds, thousands, of people playing their part, including those who sacrificed to work, to build one of those singular edifices dedicated to the Glory of God. The same is true with each of these patients.

So 10 or 15 of those expert, dedicated, and compassionate people were bustling around the E.R., corridors, lab, and operating room, doing what they know how to do. It was clear that E.A. had some severe injuries to his abdomen and pelvis. We were getting the operating room ready, & we were rapidly losing ground with Paleto. He was bleeding to death internally. Lying in a gurney all hooked up to monitors and lines, apparently unconscious and pale as death, he opened his eyes, grabbed my shirt and pulled me down close. He said “Maquini!” (that is what a lot of people here call me--I guess it’s how “McKenney” sounds to them). “Maquini!...NO ME DEJES MORIR!” (“Don’t let me die!”)

I’ll not say what that feels like, but what I said to him was “Paleto, te digo, primero Dios, no te vas ser morti” (“Paleto, I’m telling you, God allowing, you are not going to die”). He pulled me closer, looked me close in the face with his eyes a little disconjugate and said “Alex!” and then passed out again. Apparently he had been trying to get people to stop calling him Paleto and start calling him Alex (which is part of his real name) … and that is all his brain could put together under the circumstances. I’ve called him Alex ever since. It still gives me a smile, partly because it took some of the drama and pressure out of begging me “don’t let me die!” and mostly because he didn’t die. But he should have by all odds.

Both Alex and I started with the small faith declaration in the Emergency Room—that against all odds he wouldn’t die. Over the next few weeks, every time he came-to, and before he conked out again, we had a little more faith that he wouldn’t die. And then we had a little faith that if we put his pelvis back together again with pins and bars, he might walk again. And every day that faith grew a little. You see, it is the paradoxical economy of faith that it increases in accordance with how much is expended. It doesn’t get used up. It grows.

I see Alex every now and then. A friend of mine saw him a few days ago running down the road with his signature big, lopsided grin on. Even though he has just now finally gotten most people to start calling him Alex, we all agree that God has something special for him to do. We truly believe that, because Faith grows.

I believe in order that I may understand.--Anselm

Straight off, that sounds kind of counter-rational to me. But that was Anselm of Canterbury, restating Augustine, who apparently was restating John 7:14–18—a pretty good chain of rational authority. Somehow in these postmodern times it is widely assumed that faith is contrary to reason & is anti-intellectual. But Anselm could reason rings around these assumptions in at least 5 languages. Anselm was the founder of Scholasticism, the originator of the ontological argument for the existence of God, and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by a papal bull of Pope Clement XI in 1720. …OK, that was 613 years after his death. Sometimes the Vatican doesn’t like to rush into things. But he was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093-1109, and they don’t give that office out to simpletons. What I’m saying is that Anselm’s was a first rate intellect, yet his credo was one that sees faith as that which informs our understanding of the world and directs our decisions.

Wanda, will not likely ever be Archbishop of Canterbury, and she might not understand Anselm’s Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Frankly, I don’t think I do either. But she has an unshakable faith which informs her understanding and directs her decisions.

Wanda is a 43 year old woman who, with her husband and 10 year old daughter, was just walking down the sidewalk in San Pedro Sula in January of this year. A drunken driver jumped the curb with his car and crushed her up against a wall. She spent 4 months in the hospitals in that city, where she certainly did not get the best of attention, sometimes waiting for weeks or months with no care whatsoever. She came to us a month or so ago with, I’m sorry to say, most every indication that both of her legs should be amputated.
I’m sorry to even show you the photographs of what things looked like when she arrived. And, though she has been well informed of this, Wanda is not having any part of the idea that she won’t walk again. We have operated on Wanda now 10 times since her arrival at Loma de Luz. The decision to take this track and undertake all of these operations and the operations to come and the work and the expense of it all definitely has been directed by her unshakable faith that she will walk again.

That faith is contagious, and faith grows…and heals. So, while she still has an infected open fracture in one leg that we are working on, she has skin covering all of her wounds now, and her feet are brought up to the right position. We will continue to work hard to give her every possibility that God will heal her and she will walk again. We are beginning to believe that she will…. because Faith hopes.…

So, why do we speak in whispers and sense that something holy illumines the great stained glass windows of the clerestory? Why do we hear the whispered prayers of the saints echo along the aisles and then rise beyond the spires where swallows swoop and cry in their small, bright voices?

I know an exceedingly honest young man who is troubled by his own answer to this question. He worries that this sense of awe might just be brain chemistry and the contrivance of the Church of Rome, which commissioned and ordained such structures as an instrument of control, to strike awe and obedience in the heart of the proletariat…That could be…. It is a rational premise, you know.

But, I contend that regardless of the mixed agendas of those who commissioned the cathedral or used it for their own mortal motives, the architects, the master builders, the stonemasons, the carpenters, glaziers, cabinetmakers, and roofers, cooperers, artists, smiths and mechanics, the journeymen and apprentices and day laborers & all of the common believers who sacrificed over the five generations of men it took to see that cathedral rise, built that great work of their lives ad dei gloriam (“to the glory of God”). Their faith shaped and cemented those stones one to another. Their faith grew as their offering to God rose up out of the ground and headed toward heaven. Their Faith informed their understanding and directed their decisions. I believe their faith is still precious to God, that He holds their offering close and honors that faith with His near presence. Our spirits sense His presence. If God is who we hope He is…. It is a rational premise, you know.

And, there is no difference in evidence between these two rational possibilities to explain why our voices drop and our spirits soar in this still, consecrated place. So, how do you choose? That’s just it. Faith, above all else, is a moral choice. You just choose. You choose to believe you are going to live or your hand is going to work or you are going to walk again. You choose to get out of the boat. You just choose.

And I choose faith, because faith heals and hopes and grows. Faith informs our understanding and directs our decisions. Faith builds things up and builds up people, like cathedrals. May He take our small faith, and grow it. To the Glory of God.

God’s grace,

Jefferson McKenney, M.D.

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News and Needs:

Shipping  Due to the continuing difficulty and costliness of bringing containers into Honduras, we are changing the procedure for items donated to the Cornerstone Foundation. If you’d like to donate any items—for the school, the hospital, the children’s home—please contact Lindy at the Cornerstone Office (cornerstone@crstone.org, phone 228-207-1811; Monday-Friday 9am-3pm) and provide her with an itemized list of what you’d like to donate. Lindy will check to confirm whether there is a need, urgency, and space available. Then she will follow up with you to arrange shipment. All items need to arrive at our office in boxes with a list of the contents affixed to the outside of the box.

Smile  This is just a reminder that you can now support Cornerstone Foundation via AmazonSmile. To do so, go to http://smile.amazon.com/ (or google AmazonSmile) and designate The Cornerstone Foundation as your charity—making sure it’s the Cornerstone Foundation in Biloxi, MS. Then .05% of every purchase will be sent to Cornerstone (the price does not go up, and there are no hidden fees).

Financially we are hurting and in need of some miraculous provision and faith. The General fund (that is, non-designated giving to Cornerstone) has not declined over recent years, but the number of patients cared for, students taught, and children nurtured has gone up. The cost of caring for each patient or child has also gone up (food, clothing, medicines, supplies, electricity—all the goods and services needful for life). As this newsletter is being written, we have about two weeks’ worth of operating expenses in the bank. This has happened in the past—finding ourselves with only 2 or 3 weeks’ worth of funds, and God has always seen us through. Please pray in faith that He will again.

Pray for his provision of the electricity to run patient monitors, suction, diagnostic lab equipment, X-RAY supplies, fridges, washing machines, surgical lights, computers, vehicles, etc. General fund giving also makes it possible to repair all the things above (or purchase replacements when they are beyond repair). It allows us to pay our Honduran staff (and for them to feed their families). It pays for shovels and sterilizing gas, surgical drapes, plumbing connections, hospital sheets and IV solution, cleaning supplies and generators, not to mention the unending licensure fees, shipping costs, and the required legal work to keep the doors open. We need prayer and faith.

Personnel Needs are also great. For a variety of their own individual reasons, we will be losing a significant number of our missionary medical and teaching staff. We have been here before too, and God has supplied. Please pray that He will again. It would be an added blessing if He supplied them before the 11th hour. It would be truly welcome, like a breath of air on sultry days or a freshening wind to lift the sails.

Please keep us in your prayers.
May God increase your faith and ours.

Sally Mahoney for Cornerstone Foundation