
The Rev. Brandon Duke: What Floor Do You Need?

**A sermon by the Rev. Brandon Duke
Proper 7 – Year C**

“What floor do you need?” I often ask this question when I’m the first in the atrium’s elevator at *Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta*, where I currently serve as a chaplain. If the person says, “floor one, please,” perhaps they’re visiting a loved one in the emergency department. In the ED, you’re likely to encounter all sorts of injuries – from broken bones to gunshot wounds. Here’s an insider tip about being seen in that department: Being examined is *not* based on a first-come, first-served basis. Instead, the examination is based upon the acuity of the injury. For example, someone experiencing chest pains is seen ahead of a person with a broken bone. That’s the first floor.

If a person on the elevator tells me, “floor two,” they’re visiting a loved one in the cardiac unit where the heart patients receive treatment, surgery, and care. Patients on this floor range in age from newborn infants to young adults. I’ve learned that if a child has a congenital heart defect, they will more than likely require surgery; however, if they are too young, they must wait. What are they waiting for? They wait for their little bodies to grow, and when the bodies grow, the heart grows within it, and at the right time, surgical intervention is recommended. Most cardiac patients have multiple surgeries ahead of them, so the hospital’s relationship with the patients and their families also grows alongside them. That’s floor two.

If a person on the elevator tells me, “floor three,” they’re visiting a loved one on the cancer and bone marrow transplant floor. Adults squirm at the word ‘cancer’ and do so (even more) when applied to children. I learned very early that almost any disease that an adult may have, a child can acquire as well. This knowledge doesn’t make the fact of cancer any easier, but when I’m on that floor, more often than not, I’m inspired by the resiliency of patients and their families, which keeps me coming back to them for wisdom and understanding.

We could keep going up in our hospital elevator this morning, but let’s stop on a floor for a while and notice some things. If we enter a room, we can easily spot who the patient is. They may be in bed or a chair, but all the patients wear hospital gowns. This humble piece of clothing helps everyone identify who needs care. The care team, whether doctors or nurses, pharmacists or unit secretaries, all pour out their available resources into everyone in that hospital who wears the blue and white hospital gown. *Children’s* is a fantastic place to serve because of the lasting joy, inspiration, and resilience I find in myself and others, even amid great suffering.

In St. Paul’s letter to the congregation in Galatia, he wrote these words,

“As many of you baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

In the hospital, the persons clothed in their hospital gowns are sometimes up and sometimes down. They hear good news and are consoled. They hear disappointing news and are set with their backs against the wall. Such is the condition of the sick. And my fellow sinners, such is the spiritual condition of us all. Jesus once taught, “Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:31,32). This morning we all made our way from the atrium into the narthex, and finally, the nave. Some of us chose to attend church and be in this space out of habit. It’s what Christians do. Some of you this morning are experiencing this place like an emergency room. Perhaps you’re here because of a trauma in your own life and hear, understand, and intuitively know that this is a place where balm

is applied, and hearts are softened. And it's here in our meditation on the hospital where the metaphor breaks down a bit. For you see, in the hospital, bodies are mended or not. Sometimes they walk outside, being discharged back into the world of their lives. Sometimes not. But listen: If we leave the imaginings of the hospital for a while and focus on where we are and what floor we are on, what we will discover is Jesus Christ, the great physician who not only knows our ups and downs and the labels and identities and ailments that we have or are placed upon us – he also redeems them. Going back to St. Paul's language, in Christ, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are at once acknowledged and redeemed with one love – his love like a father to his child, like the enslaved being emancipated, like a patient who sheds their hospital gown for a baptismal one. This morning, all of us are exactly where we need to be.

When I'm on the hospital's elevators, I try not to ask people, "What floor do you want," because nobody wants to be at the hospital. Instead, I ask, "What floor do you need," because I trust the person to be there to support and advocate and love the patient they are about to visit. Perhaps they realize there's no way around reality. It must be acknowledged with a "bring it on" attitude. But back here, and in this house of worship, we also join in with the One who has not only made reality but through and by and with his cross, he has redeemed reality as well. We will allow the great physician to examine our thoughts, words, and deeds in a moment. And every so tenderly, those spots on our hearts will be wiped away, and in place of them will be a peace that passes all understanding so that we can pass on that same peace to others. Finally, and in this place, you'll all find a prescription. It's a prescription of love from our creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. And the medicine is not only written by the physician but is the physician himself. Taking him into our bodies, he then enters into our souls. It's a miracle and one that all can experience. So again, I will not ask, "What floor do you want?" Asking this points to false truths, alternative realities, and unnecessary distractions. Instead, "What floor do you need?" You already know the answer, and in a moment come – take and receive the treatment (and answer) that opens us up to spiritual healing, wholeness, and love – the Body of Christ. The Bread of Heaven. For by Christ, and in Christ, and with Christ we are always and at every moment sanctified, redeemed, and loved. Thanks be to God.