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by Mark Etling

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Last spring, my wife, Terry, was diagnosed with a Stage 4 glioblastoma brain tumor. Since then, she has been through successful surgery to remove the tumor; three

weeks at a rehab center; and six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation. She's now in the midst of a second round of chemo treatments, and thankfully there has been no recurrence of the tumor.

Terry has experienced several side effects from all this. She's lost her appetite, and when she does eat, hardly anything tastes good to her. She has extreme cancer fatigue, which means she spends much of the day in bed. She perseverates a lot — the same thoughts keep looping in her head, and she repeats them over and over to whoever happens to be with her.

She's always been an anxious person — now she becomes anxious at the smallest deviation from the day's plan. In social situations, she becomes panicky and wants to leave after just a few minutes.

We are members of St. Vincent de Paul Parish near downtown St. Louis. We almost always attend the 9 a.m. Sunday Mass. And like most good Catholics, we almost always sit in the same pew with the same group of fellow parishioners.

This past Sunday we went to the 9 a.m. with our oldest grandson, Brandon. All through the Liturgy of the Word, Terry seemed fairly calm and engaged. She even stood for the Gospel reading and the recitation of the creed.

It all started to go south during the presentation of the gifts.

"Mark, I have to leave. I won't make it."

"You're doing fine," I whispered. "It's just a little bit longer."

"Mark, you promised we would leave if I couldn't make it."

"I know. It won't be much longer. Brandon has to bring the food we brought up to the altar."

"I want to go."

On and on. And on.

By the time Brandon returned, I had given up. I told him we would have to leave early, and I started to zip up my coat.

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Then I looked back at Terry. She had stopped perseverating. Her anxiety was gone. She sat calmly, at peace, eyes fixed on the altar. What had happened?

And then I looked down. Sheila, one of the "regulars" who was sitting with her husband and daughter in the pew in front of us, had turned around and was holding Terry's hand.

As tears welled up in my eyes, all I could do was look at Sheila and say, "Thank you so much."

A few minutes later, another of the "regulars," our friend Jeff, took over. As he held Terry's hand he whispered to her his admiration for her courage and inspiration.

We stayed for the remainder of the Mass. Terry was attentive and responsive — she even walked all the way to the front of church to receive Communion.

Terry had been healed — by the simple, sacred act of touching.

As we know from the news these days, touching is a profoundly ambiguous gesture. An unwanted touch can be a violent act, an assertion of power, an assault on the bodily integrity of another.

But as Sheila and Jeff demonstrated, touching can be an act of peacemaking, of communion, of healing.

I was reminded on Sunday that we are the eyes and ears and hands of God. God does not dispense the grace of healing from the heavens. We — God's incarnate presence on earth — are responsible to bring God's healing to our brothers and sisters in pain. God is waiting for us, God is depending on us to heal one another.

That day I witnessed firsthand the sacred — dare I say miraculous — power of human touch.

Sheila's hand was the hand of God. Jeff's hand was the hand of God. A miracle of healing took place on Sunday. Terry was healed — and so was I.

[Mark Etling is the spiritual programs coordinator at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois. He is also an adjunct assistant professor for the School for Professional Studies at St. Louis University.]

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