

When You See Someone Who Needs a Blessing

Pass One On

Jeremy was a premature baby. He was delivered by emergency c-section 6 weeks early. The umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck and he had developed pneumonia while in the womb, which only occurs in one in 10,000 births. Jeremy was transferred to the University of New Mexico department of Neonatal Intensive Care a few hours after he was born. Because of the infection and his immature lungs, his oxygen saturation was extremely low. The doctors determined he was a candidate for an ECMO procedure. ECMO is a heart-lung bypass done on infants and children. Our priest, Father Judd Wagg, happened upon my husband, who had collapsed in the hallway trying to figure out how he was going to tell us the baby had died. The doctors had just told him that if he was a religious man, he might want to have the baby baptized. They did not expect him to make it. Father Judd took a bottle of sterile water, blessed it and baptized our son the day he was born.

After Father Judd left, my husband, Michael, was sitting next to the warming table.

They don't put little babies into cribs. The table had a monitor hooked up to Jeremy's heart and, with another tube, was keeping track of his oxygen saturation. He had a feeding tube and a machine called the "jet ventilator" that was inflating his lungs giving them time to mature, while breathing for him. His numbers weren't very good and dropping by the minute. A man dressed in scrubs came up to the table. He had a long dark-blond pony tail and weathered skin. He checked the monitor and then put his hand on Jeremy's chest. He turned and smiled at Michael and walked by him, putting his hand on his shoulder and told him "He's going to be fine," and left. Jeremy started to get better within a few minutes. His oxygen levels went up, his heart rate began to drop towards normal. The nurses and doctors were all dumbfounded. They asked Michael if he had touched the monitor. He told them about the man who had come to the table and put his hand on Jeremy. Nobody knew who he was. There was neither nurse nor doctor matching his description that anyone knew of. Jeremy was still critically ill, but the ECMO was not necessary now. He still had to have a blood transfusion, but he continued to improve and was able to come home ten days later...quite a rough start for such a tiny baby. We still do not know who the man was. My husband, who is not a religious man, believes that he saw an angel that day.

Three and a half years later, it was a Saturday morning in December, cold and clear. The bright New Mexico winter sun was warming up the air so a long-sleeved shirt was all you needed, casting long shadows across the lawn. You wonder how a sky can be that blue. We were having a yard sale. We had just moved into our new house. I stopped counting the boxes when I got over 125 and for the last six weeks had diligently unpacked each evening until everything was out or stowed away. We were getting rid of things like the double-stroller and bunk beds. Our teenage daughters were finally getting their own rooms in the new house.

Later that day, I took some of the yard-sale money and brought home a new bed. Elizabeth had turned sixteen and was having her first boy-girl party that evening. When we moved into the neighborhood, we discovered long-time friends and their three kids just over the wall on the next street, so we had ladders propped up against the cinderblock walls on either side. The kids were free to travel back and forth without having to walk around the block.

Jeremy was an active little boy, with blond hair and blue eyes and a dimpled smile. His brother was a slightly older version, at five, except his hair was brown. I routinely called them adorable and incorrigible depending on the hour of the day and the day of the

week. Our two young sons spent the better part of the day next door. Later in the evening, Jeremy started complaining of a stomach ache. He didn't have a fever, so I kept a close watch without becoming too alarmed. I kept finding him in unusual places....stretched out across the stairs...hiding under the desk...propped next to the toilet against the bathroom wall. He threw up most of the night long after the adolescent guests had left the party.

I stayed home from church that Sunday, calling in sick from teaching my Sunday school class. I still was not too worried as I kept on with my Sunday chores, thinking Jeremy had a bad bout with the flu.

By nightfall, he was extremely dehydrated and I was getting really worried. My husband and I took Jeremy to the emergency room. After triage and a few hours, we finally got in and were seen by the pediatrician. To our relief, it was Dr. Martz, our long-time regular doctor. He still thought it was the flu and thought hydrating him would help, so they hooked him up to an IV. They put us in an observation room for the night. Dr. Martz told me, "He'll probably bounce back like a droopy flower that needs water...and besides you don't want to be out driving home at this hour with all the bad guys out there." It was 2:00AM. Michael drove home alone to be with our other children.

Monday morning came and they were not releasing him. His vomiting and diarrhea were constant. Two surgeons came in and examined Jeremy, in their greens with surgical masks around their necks. They ordered blood drawn and had an NG tube put up Jeremy's nose and down into his stomach. I watched. He was too weak to protest. The tube was to help keep the vomiting down by sucking up anything that was in his stomach.

Tuesday morning a CAT scan was ordered. The blood work was normal. His white cell count had not spiked, which can indicate an infection and possible appendicitis. They strapped him into a straight-jacket and me into a lead-lined gown to keep him as quiet as possible. The CAT scan showed no obstruction.

I spent every night with him, sleeping with him in his bed. The nurses were so kind, writing the chart, as if I were a breast-feeding mom...so I could get meals without having to go out. I could not interest Jeremy in anything...not even a Popsicle.

I knew most of the doctors by sight. The "POW" was the "physician on ward". Each doctor had his own style. Dr. Crocetti was the handsome doc, young, and the best dresser with the latest fashion in matching shirts and ties when he checked in on us. Bearded Dr. Dankert always came into our room and listened to Jeremy's breathing and my concerns at the start of his shift, going into each child's room and not just relying on what was

written on the chart. Dr. Martz, our regular doctor, was like the rumpled college history professor, be-speckled with a white wrinkled shirt and dark tie, checking in on us every day that he was at the hospital. Reverend Kathy Moore from our church came and said a healing prayer along with Heather Gaume the director of Christian Education. Dear, sweet Heather had been coming every day.

Dr, Lawrence was the chief of pediatric surgery at UNMH and when Jeremy became a surgical candidate, he looked in on us when he was making a rotation at the hospital. He was so kind...even taking time to talk with Jeremy's brother, Philip. My husband brought our three other kids to the hospital to see Jeremy. The nurses drew blood samples every few hours, monitored his oxygen saturation and heart rate, watched for blood in his stool and came to no conclusions about what was going on. Jeremy was losing weight every day. I did not know what to do to try to help him. Michael would bring me a change of clothes and Gail, a dear friend of mine who lived near the hospital, came every day and spelled me so that I could at least get a shower. I would sneak outside the room into the hallway and catch a bite to eat, unwilling to eat in front of my sweet son, who still could not keep anything down. I spent each night sleeping on his bed with him around all the tubes with my left hand on his little stiff belly trying to draw

out the pain. In my mind's eye I could see it like red sparks....but it never went away,...just kept growing in intensity.

Friday morning, Dr. Lawrence visited us again from UNMH. He brought with him Dr. Chun who was on call that weekend to meet us. She was a petite oriental woman with tiny fingers. "Perfect for pediatric surgery," I thought to myself.

Friday night was our worst night ever. We paged the POW on call that night, Dr. Gabay, and he never came into our room even once. He didn't want to be bothered with us or his sleep interrupted, I guessed. Jeremy told me he wanted to die. I told him that I didn't fight so hard for him when he was born to lose him now...that we would find out what was wrong and make the "owie" go away. I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I went up to Dr. Wilkinson, who had been the pediatrician in charge all week, during the day. She was young in her middle thirties and wore her blonde hair in a ponytail. I told her that I was transferring my son to UNMH. With or without her permission we were getting him out of that hospital. She was looking at the computer screen pouring over the labs and test results. I heard her gasp. She was reading the final radiology report, which showed an obstruction in the CAT scan. I asked her, "He had the CAT scan on Tuesday, and you are just finding out on Saturday that the CAT scan

showed an obstruction? How can that be?" She just shook her head and looked at me. The ambulance arrived and the driver told me I would have to follow in another car. My eyes filled with tears. He took one look at me and reluctantly agreed to let me sit beside him in the front of the ambulance. My husband followed us over. He was exhausted too, trying to manage our camera repair shop, get the kids to school and come see us every day at the hospital.

At UNMH, the first thing they did was order more lab work and x-rays. Dr. Chun met us in the exam room. I had been finishing Jeremy's Christmas stocking all week, sewing tiny stitches into felt with sequins. I hung his stocking in his room. Santa Claus came in and Jeremy said, relieved, that he wasn't sure Santa would be able to find sick boys. Our priest, Father Chuck Collins, from St. Mark's Episcopal Church, came also and we prayed. So...the surgeon, the priest and Santa Claus all showed up at the same time crowded into that tiny exam room with a Christmas stocking hung over Jeremy's bed. It was Saturday, Dec. 20th.

Dr Chun told us that she still wasn't sure what was going on. His white cell count had just begun to spike. She said we couldn't wait any longer. She needed to do emergency, exploratory surgery.

We signed a lot of papers that afternoon. It began to snow. The anesthesiologist asked me about the anesthesia. I asked him what he would do if it were his son. We decided on the catheter that went directly into his spine. It would help him manage his pain and heal faster, is what the doctor told me. They were wheeling him into surgery and I couldn't go. I had been with him constantly for the past week and was losing it. Tears were streaming down my face as I tried to calm myself. I grasped for something to tell our son. Mike was holding me to keep me from losing it completely. I remembered

“Curious George” and the puzzle piece. I told Jeremy, “Remember Curious George when the puzzle piece was stuck in his throat? The doctors had to take the puzzle piece out, and George's dad (The man with the yellow hat) could not go into surgery with him. He waited for George right outside. I will be right outside here waiting for you, Jeremy, after the doctors take the “owie” out. Mommy and Daddy will be right here. We love you.”

The snow fell, we held each other and we waited. Family and friends came by and stayed with us. It was the longest afternoon of my life. Several hours into the surgery, the anesthesiologist came out. He was done with his shift. I guess they do that in the middle of surgery, leave in the middle of the operation and someone new takes over. I

was hoping the surgeon stayed until the end. He told us how the operation was going. They found something in his small intestine and took out his appendix.

Almost five hours later, they let us see him. He had a ruptured small intestine and Dr. Chun had removed 25 cm. and done a re-section. We would wait and see if the stitches held and the infection went down.

The next day Dr. Lawrence found us and had copies for us from one of his medical journals. Jeremy had what is called Meckel's Diverticulum. It occurs in 2% of the population which is why it is considered an anomaly and not a birth defect. Some doctor named Meckel discovered it in the early 1800's doing autopsies. It is a balloon that forms off of the small intestine. In most cases, people live their entire lives with no symptoms nor complications. In Jeremy's case, it ruptured and became gangrenous. Dr. Lawrence took the time to highlight the important parts and cross through what I didn't need to worry about. Bless his heart.

The next several days were like two steps forward and one-step back. Before the surgery, they had put in a central line, which made it a lot easier to draw blood and give Jeremy the antibiotics and fluids he needed. They did not have to prick a fresh vein or

artery each time. Sometimes he got a rash from the antibiotics, sometimes he threw up and we would start back with keeping just popsicles down. The respiratory therapist came every few hours to pound on Jeremy's chest. Everyone listened for bowel sounds. One of the RN's there was an herbalist. One wore a Tibetan healing bracelet and placed her hands on our son's belly, drawing the infection out. I believed in all of it.

Our daughters had been real troopers since this all began. Jessica, at sixteen, had her driver's license and picked up Philip every day from school. She and her sister, Elizabeth, held the fort down at the house doing the dishes, laundry and cooking. Everyday they packed a change of clothes for me which Michael brought to the hospital with the newspaper. I skimmed through the ads and circled the presents I wanted her to buy for the kids (the grown-ups could wait until later). She practiced forging my signature on my credit card before going out to shop. She got really good at it. That was a decision I would live to regret long after we came home from the hospital. They did a lot of growing up that week.

Father Judd Wagg from our church came every day to pray with us. The Frost Mortgage corporate Santa came through the halls with a wagon full of toys dispensing them to the kids too sick to go home for Christmas. I bundled Jeremy up with his oxygen

tank into a wagon and we walked the corridors. On Christmas Eve Day, two strangers came into our room and gave us gifts...people I had never met. On Christmas Eve, everything got quiet. Only the really sick kids were still there. Santa was visiting the kids in the emergency room and came up to our room. He reached into his sack full of gifts and pulled out a glowing green Star Wars light saber for Jeremy. The doctors and nurses had more fun with it than Jeremy did. We slept and dreamed.

Christmas morning Father Judd came in again after the church service, taking time away from his own family to be with us, shuffling in with his head bowed and saying the three simple words "Let us pray".

Every day Jeremy got a little bit better. On December 27th, two weeks after he began to get sick, he came home. Mike & I had our Christmas celebration then with his sisters and brother, Jessica, Elizabeth and Philip.

I can never repay the many people who helped us through this ordeal: the nurse or doctor who went the extra mile, bent the rules a little to allow sibling visits or meals for me: the friends who brought groceries and cooked meals or picked up my kids from school, Santa with his busy schedule taking time to visit, or our church family and the

many visits and prayers.

My gift from this experience is this: Much of what happens in our lives is a mosquito bite in the universe of things. I have stood at the long dark abyss of almost losing a child more than once and fortunately, did not have to go there. By the grace of God and the skill of the nurses and doctors and an angel, somewhere...I have the gift of my son's life. Every day since this happened has been a blessing. When you see someone who needs your help, don't wait for them to ask. Pay attention. Fix a meal. Buy some groceries. Provide transportation. Give a hug. Say a prayer.

Every Christmas Eve we go to the hospital and give some toys to kids who can't come home. ...for almost 12 years now. We don't know who those children are. It doesn't matter. When you see someone who needs a blessing, pass one on.