

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these - Matthew 19:14

Hi. My name is Jacob and I'm an Episcopalian. I'm not a wolf in sheep's clothing or anything. It's just the way I was raised and seemed like an important detail. I guess there's some structural and theological differences between the Episcopal and Lutheran churches, but I really think it all boils down to who you are as a person. The flavor of your faith is not what's important. It's the fact that you strive for the best version of you.

This version that is me started his faith journey when he was 7. Kneeling in front of his indoor playschool slide he asked Jesus into his heart. It was a very adorable moment. What followed after that was the typical path: Sunday School – where I learned humility while playing hangman with a young lady. The prompt was “I love” and she had drawn out enough letters for two words, each containing the same number of letters as my first and middle names. I was just about to tell her that she put the “i” in the wrong spot for Martin – my middle name – when it hit me that the answer was that she loved Jesus Christ and not Jacob Martin.

My path went through youth group: I took a trip to Israel when I was in High School. We went to Bethlehem, the Wailing Wall, the Dead Sea. It was a ton of fun *seeing* all the history from the stories we had learned as children. I remember it being hot and us boys were not allowed to wear shorts into the holy places. So, we borrowed long skirts from the girls to wear over our shorts. Got quite a few strange looks from folks for that! I learned that there are many ways and reasons for people to look different from what you would otherwise expect.

My path went through acolyting: My sister, brother, and I learned the alphabet in sign language so we could spell out sentences to each other across the altar while we were serving. It used to drive

my mother crazy because she could see us nodding yes or no when we could or could not understand the letters. We would get in trouble just about every week for doing it but we just kept at it! I learned that – sometimes – quiet disobedience is not the end of the world and that there is a place for humor and fun even in strict circumstances.

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. - John 16:33

After high school, I went to a liberal arts college and studied science. I majored in Chemistry with an emphasis on medical school prerequisites. Those classes and the 4 years of medical school that came after them taught me to question...to search for the concrete answers...not only to understand...but to *explain*. This is what is required in medicine.

As a Pediatric Oncologist, I have the privilege of being with a family during what is likely going to be one of the worst moments of their life. Having to tell a family their child has cancer is not an easy thing to do. I have a couple of tricks that I tell myself make things better – sit lower than the family, use open body language, do not block the way out of the room – but nothing I do can take away the shock and terror that comes after hearing your child has cancer. I've had conversations that go very smoothly...and I've had ones that were absolute nightmares.

It is incredibly difficult to understand and accept the “master plan” that includes giving a 6-year-old boy a terminal disease. No one – no matter their age – deserves cancer. But how can you explain the need...no, the design that includes this level of targeted cruelty. What is the explanation that makes it okay and acceptable to point a finger at an innocent child and say no...in the most final of terms.

This 6-year-old boy – let's call him Jason – had more faith than anyone I have ever met. He was diagnosed with Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, DIPG. This is the only diagnosis where I have to tell a family that there is nothing I will be able to do to cure their child. There is no hope. DIPG is uniformly fatal. The only unknown is how much time remains. Jason's parents did not keep any of this information from him. They shared with him what was happening. I do not know what they said when he asked them – as I imagine he did – why him. But Jason had faith. He would talk excitedly about getting to meet Jesus. I don't know how to process that. He was 6.

Jason's family took him to a center of excellence to learn about some Phase 1 treatment options. While he was there, he made a point of buying me a present. You see, I wear scrubs at work because the military uniform isn't exactly the most reassuring visual in the Pediatric Oncology clinic – and who doesn't like wearing what are essentially jammies to work every day? I like to wear crazy socks to spice up my look and Jason knew this. He brought me back a pair of socks with airplanes on them. I wore them to his funeral...and every funeral for one of my patients that I've been to since. I have them on now.

Jason's is just one of many stories I have. Not all of them are that tragically depressing. There are happy stories. Like the day when Ashley got to ring the bell to celebrate her last day of chemotherapy and we had so many people there to celebrate they couldn't fit in our clinic. They lined the hallways for this 4-year-old to celebrate the end of suffering she had endured so she could survive. I ate a cupcake.

Jason, Ashley, and countless others. All with their unique experience and journey. All demanding the same answer – why me? The clinical answer is simple – cancer has no explanation. One cell in the body goes rogue and loses the instructions telling it to stop growing. So it keeps growing and

dividing. Cancer just happens. The human body creates approximately 330 billion cells every day. That's 3.8 million cell divisions per second. Each of those cell divisions can have an error that leads to a cancer cell. Eventually, the odds catch up to you. That's the scientific explanation. What is the faith explanation for it, though. Why the need for such suffering on such a personal level? I recently watched *Conclave*, a movie about the selection of a new Pope and the politics surrounding this particular event. At one point, Ralph Fiennes' character, Cardinal Lawrence describes faith in a homily to the College of Cardinals, "if there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery. And therefore no need for faith." Doubt. Indeed.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. - Isaiah 43:2

The world burns around us. Tolerance has given way to prejudice. Acceptance is replaced by repudiation. Love has dissolved into hate. Many stand behind religion to justify why "their way" is the "right way." How is any of this remotely connected? How do we stand behind the mantle of religion to legitimize intolerance? How do we celebrate the suffering of others because they do not look like us, act like us, believe like us. Your version of you is up to you...not me. I see people celebrate the dissolution of being good as a victory in the name of...what? How is this okay? What plan is this?

In this season of Lent, we are asked to give something up. To remind us of Jesus' 40 days in the desert. To sacrifice in search of betterment and in so doing to connect with those who do not have. As someone much wiser than me told us not too long ago – grace costs us nothing. Let us

extend that grace beyond these 40 days. Why stop at Lent? We should sacrifice for others on a constant basis...because we can.

There is no downside to being good. Sure, we may not win the argument. Or come out on top in the work conversation – this meeting definitely could have been an e-mail, Janice. But what harm is there in *giving* grace? Do not grant grace...do not bestow grace...give grace. What harm is there in treating each other with dignity and respect because we are not on this earth as Lutheran, Episcopal, Muslim, or Buddhist...but as human. We are not good because we are religious...we are religious because we *want to do good*.

My faith journey is one that has no end. No destination. The ramblings of the past seven minutes certainly shed some light on...well, *me*. My journey will last as long as I do. There are days I do a good job. And, God help me, days when I do not. On this journey I *must* be a good person, though. Not because the Bible tells me to be...but because it is the right thing to do. And only when we all join together on this journey...when we share our common good...when we embrace each other not in spite of our differences but *because* of those differences – only then can we ever truly live as any community should be lucky enough to live. As good people.

Amen.