

# APRIL

## “Living Documents” by Deacon Matthew Petersen

### Hymn Suggestion

“Light Dawns on a Weary World” (ELW #726) or “Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go” (LSB #854)

### Scripture

*“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8*

### Devotion

Considered to be the father of Clinical Pastoral Education, Anton Boisen described patients as “living documents” to be read by chaplains and other spiritual caregivers. While this may seem a bit impersonal to our diaconal ears, Boisen rightly directs our attention to the patient in need of spiritual care. The patient is the subject of the encounter, not an object to be analyzed or taught. In many contexts, but especially in hospice or hospital care, the patient is most often the object of tests, therapies (and sadly) often spoken about in the third person -- objectified within earshot.

Micah 6:8 has been written on my heart since I was a child. I often sang the verse in morning chapel at camp or around the evening campfire. Much of our baptismal call, our response to grace, is contained in this short passage. It is difficult to imagine a context where we cannot be guided by these ancient words. Justice, mercy, and humility have been the touchstones that I reach for not only in my ministry as a chaplain, but in every area of my life.



While justice and mercy are critical to spiritual care, humility is a way of living and doing ministry that must be cultivated by a chaplain or any faith leader. Without a spirit of humility, one cannot effectively “read” the “living document” or hear the story of the patient. Humility allows us to enter the story of the patient, to get out of the way and “give space... unleash imagination and memory, and open the possibility for healing, for challenge, for transformation. (Boisen)”

People often wonder what I “do” as a hospital chaplain resident. There seems to be an expectation or an assumption that I come to the ministry encounter with the “right” words to say, or “say” something to allow the patient to be more at peace -- or even lead death-bed conversions. These notions couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, I often feel that the most holy encounters happen when I “do” nothing. As a diaconal caregiver, I see myself as less of a storyteller, but more of a story hearer.

My role as hearer is to create a space for patients and the Holy Spirit to tell the story of the patient's life and experience of this season of their journey on earth. In order to create that space, as a chaplain I must also be intentionally present to the patient and the Holy Spirit as their story is shared. Both are ways of “being” rather than “doing” and take disciplined humility on my part, of which I sometimes fail.

“Living documents” are all around us, not only in the hospital bed. There are holy stories yet to be shared and heard. Are we listening?

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

- In what ways do you “read living documents” in your ministry context or daily life?
- How can you strive “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly” in your call?

### **Prayer**

*Listening God, we thank you for stories and storytellers. Open our ears to hear more deeply the stories of others and the voice of your Spirit. Amen.*

### **About the Author**

Deacon Matthew Petersen is a chaplain in Cincinnati currently serving at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. He is also a volunteer “chaplain” to dogs at the Interfaith Hospitality Network Pet Support Program. Matthew and his wife have two dogs of their own and four backyard chickens. Matthew spends his time reading, swimming, hiking, and trying to be more like Ted Lasso.