

Getting behind Jesus—again

By [Phyllis Kersten](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Kersten's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Two of Merlyn's daughters, members of our church, asked me to visit their mom as the end of her five-month battle with cancer drew near. Merlyn was 72, and her life had not been easy. She was widowed at 43 and raised her four children by herself.

When I came to see her, she was alone, lying in bed by the window in the back room of the house. One of her daughters introduced me and left. I read some verses from Isaiah 43 to Merlyn:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you... For I am the Lord your God, your Savior.... You are precious in my sight, and I love you.

I told Merlyn this was the promise God had given her in her baptism long ago: she was precious to God. And whatever she went through—even the isolating suffering of cancer, even death—God in Christ would be there with her. The whole time I was with her, Merlyn was lying in bed with her face turned away from me, toward the window that looked out on her backyard. She never moved, never turned to face me, never responded.

I prayed, and I left. It didn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that I hadn't "connected" with her.

I sat in the living room for a while afterwards, talking to Merlyn's children, puzzling at the same time over

what I had done wrong. Her daughters mentioned again to me what they had told me before: their mother had been devastated by the diagnosis of cancer because, in many ways, she felt she was just coming into her prime.

Merlyn had taken several courses at the local community college--among them ballroom, country western and line dancing--and had been performing the past several years with a seniors dance group at local senior centers, college and community events. For twelve years she also taught English as a Second Language to recent immigrants. She tutored several students in her home, buying books and other material for them out of her own money, and taking many of them under her wing.

After listening to her children's stories, I went back in to see their mother again. She was still facing the window.

"Merlyn," I began, "I just wanted to come in again to say how sorry I am that your life is being cut short, just when you felt you were entering your prime." And Merlyn turned toward me. Shortly thereafter, she and her family and I shared communion together in that back room, that farewell meal Jesus offered for his disciples the night he was betrayed, which still gives forgiveness and strength.

Not long ago I read an observation by a character in Joanna Trollope's novel *The Rector's Wife*. A woman deacon speaks about the difficulties some of her colleagues have in feeling "the emotional agonies in which some people labored, shackled to delinquent children or senile parents or destructive marriages." The character continues,

You could not just say, Christ will help you bear it. That was opting out. You had to show that you understood the suffering, knew the price it exacted, as a fellow human being, before you even thought of bringing Christ into it.

As I learned from Merlyn, we cannot hope to minister in Jesus' name without "getting behind Jesus," entering into people's suffering and sorrow and mourning with them.

One of the readings at Merlyn's funeral was John 14, in which Jesus says, "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places," many rooms. I said in my homily that I was pretty sure that at least one of these rooms is a ballroom. Quoting from the song "The Lord of the Dance," I expressed my belief that Merlyn was on the dance floor again, with that dance partner now.