

MILE MARKERS

My son is home, briefly, between a year studying in Germany and his junior year at Michigan Tech. He spent a day with his grandfather recently, trying to solve a computer mystery. Stephan and my dad chatted happily away over my head in their private language about the source of the problem. All I know is this. My Dad is an avid model railroader, who not so long ago switched tracks from N Gauge toy trains to virtual railroading on the computer. He is recreating the line between Marshfield and Wausau, and is putting in the signage along the tracks. Except, that for some reason, he is unable to get numbers on his mile markers. He just hurtles down the tracks past blank signs trying to guess how far he's come.

I know the feeling. It seems that I am hurtling past a whole lot of mile markers right now, and I'm not sure where I am. On a grand scale, my children are some of my mile markers. By the time you read this, both my children will be off to college, Stephan in Houghton for year three, Julia in Boston as a freshman. And within months, weeks even, they will turn 21 and 18 respectively.

But these milestones mostly leave me melancholy. It is another set of mile markers that leave me confused. About the time you read this, I will be completing my last round of chemotherapy. I've been out pretty much every other week for the last six months, sometimes more due to unexpected side effects, trying to remain your pastor while out of touch in my bed. Of course, I added to the drama by breaking my right arm at the end of July, requiring surgery. But come September, I will start to look normal again. The cast will come off (though I'm not sure of a date). My hair will grow back (even now my head is beginning to resemble a gray peach). My hands and feet will lose their unnatural "tan." My office hours will become more regular. I will take over more of the preaching again. Soon you will begin to forget that I have ever been sick.

But I won't.

And so I want to ask for your patience. I've been through this once before, and so I have an idea what to expect (which is both a blessing and a curse). I know I will begin to feel physically better, stronger a little at a time. But I also remember that I went from chemo to hospitalization within 24 hours last time in a great deal of pain. It is not a straight line, this recovery track. And even as I will feel better physically, I remember that the emotional recovery is much slower. Finishing chemo is like waking up and finding yourself whizzing down the tracks when none of the markers have numbers on them. You aren't sure how far you've traveled while asleep, what you've missed, where you are, what you need to prepare for. And worst of all, now that you have counted all the telephone poles of chemo, you are left without any markers to tell you how much further you have ahead of you. So you live on edge, with one hand on your baggage in case your stop comes up suddenly. It is not an easy way to travel through life. Again, I ask for your patience. You've been extraordinarily patient with me already, and I thank God for that. But I ask for another measure of it while I try to figure out how to get some numbers on my mile markers.