

The Unexpected Choice

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"MRS. GREER, YOU MUST ABORT YOUR BABY." The words wrapped me in horror. They offered a solution worse than the problem could ever be. I had cancer, now I was pregnant, and Dr. Krueger wanted me to abort. How could I bear it?

It was May 1986; a time when life was born, not taken away. It had *not* been a good year. In January I first discovered a lump in my left breast about the size of a small pea. My husband's employer was changing insurance companies and had not decided on the new one. Our family finances were in such deplorable shape that I didn't dare see a doctor unless a good insurance policy was in place. In February I managed to severely damage our only car when I swerved to miss an oncoming vehicle. It was still driveable, but the windows on the driver's side were broken out and we did not have the necessary funds to replace them. It is very cold in northern Virginia in February.

Then about mid-March the new insurance company was chosen and the lump had not become larger—a good sign. I made an appointment with Dr. Fanale, my obstetrician. He examined me and diagnosed fibrocystic tumors. He wanted me to see a general surgeon "just to be sure." Two weeks later, I had a biopsy.

Prior to the surgery, my surgeon, Dr. Seamons, said, "Linda, I don't believe it's cancer. You're simply not a candidate. I'd tell you if I thought it was a possibility." Twenty-four hours later in the recovery room it was a different story. With tears running in rivulets down his cheeks, he said, "Linda, it *is* cancer. The breast will have to be removed."

I said, "How will I feed my babies?"

He gently but firmly replied, "Linda, there will be no more babies," but the unmistakable voice of a kind heavenly father assured me the "no more babies" part was not true. His spirit surrounded me, despite the grim diagnosis.

Four days later I underwent surgery for a modified radical mastectomy. The following week Dr. Krueger, my oncologist, recommended six months of chemo and radiation therapy because of the lymph node

involvement. I resisted the idea. I had several close friends who had undergone chemotherapy with less than desirable results. One died after a seven-year struggle with what I believed was chemotherapy—not cancer. I struggled for several weeks about my decision. I had not decided firmly to follow the advice of the doctors, but I was weakening. I knew it was important to obtain baseline x-rays for the medical staff to have in evaluating my progress.

On the scheduled day I entered the all too familiar x-ray suite, signed the register, and seated myself in a comfortable chair with a favorite magazine to pass the time. As I began to peruse the magazine, I found myself becoming extremely uncomfortable with a sign on the wall directly opposite my chair, "IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE PREGNANT, PLEASE INFORM THE RECEPTIONIST." I had been in many x-ray rooms with lots of those signs, but this time the sign seemed to speak to me. Eventually, I got up and moved to the adjacent side of the room, hoping to avoid the power of the sign. I felt rather stupid. The presence of the sign became so annoying I was motivated to get up, cross the room, and inform the receptionist to place a lead shield over my pelvic region. The receptionist informed me such a thing was not possible, because the area they needed to shoot was located in that region.

I said, "Well, go ahead, then."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Greer, we can't do that. We need to find out if you're pregnant."

I thought, "Pregnant? That's absurd." I was only six weeks post-op.

I was sent to the hospital lab to have my blood drawn for a serum pregnancy test. I was asked to wait for the results and informed it would take about twenty minutes. I read another magazine. Finally, a fresh-pressed nurse came into the room and crossed to the phone at the nurse's station. "Hello, Dr. Krueger, Mrs. Greer's pregnancy test is positive."

Positive? There was simply no way I could be pregnant. "Nurse, maybe my blood sample was confused with someone else's."

"Mrs. Greer, you're the only patient who has been in the laboratory this morning. There is no mistake. Dr. Krueger wants you to come to his office right away."

As I was walking through the hospital corridors toward the parking lot, the wave of surprise and shock melted into sheer elation that a new life had begun and would add to our quiver of seven children. By the time I reached the exit doors, I was shedding tears of joy at the prospect of having a new baby.

Dr. Krueger was not nearly so excited. In fact, he was angry. The truth of the matter was never in our whole married lives had we tried to prevent pregnancy except this time. Then Dr. Krueger delivered the blow—"Mrs. Greer, you must abort this baby. Your cancer is estrogen sensitive. If

you continue with the pregnancy, expect large tumor growth and possible death. You have a 40 percent chance of living, at best." Now I was angry. In his stiffly starched manner he presumed to be God, capable of deciding my fate with his statistics and theories. How can anyone measure a mother's heart?

I drove home in a somber mood. My husband and I made an appointment with Dr. Krueger for the next afternoon. At the conclusion of the appointment I had a lump in my throat but anger was still my dominant emotion—anger that I could have been placed in such a dilemma. How could I have the wisdom to choose between our baby's life and my own?

Several days later I attended a church Institute class on Contemporary Issues. The topic was abortion. The sources of authority were messages and letters from our church leaders and the scriptures. The longer we discussed the issue, the more emotionally uncomfortable I became. When my inner turmoil had just about moved me to my feet and flight, the instructor quoted, "A mother should do everything in her power to preserve her life." I felt as if my heart would stop beating. I consulted with my bishop. I fasted and prayed fervently. I had my name placed on the temple prayer roll.

The following week during my regularly scheduled oncology appointment the doctor said, "Linda, you have seven children. They need a mother." I went home, driving slowly to stretch my time to think and ponder the gravity of that statement. They did need a mother. I know of others who had chosen abortion. I had compassion and understanding for these people, who wrestled with this agonizing resolution. It is not easy to make such a decision. Like the individual right to choose or reject chemotherapy treatment, it must be a personal choice, one that cannot fairly be judged by another. The weight of the issue must be decided through deep thought, fasting, prayer, and listening to the spirit.

At this point I remembered an interview with Sammy Davis, Jr., on television when I was fifteen. The commentator asked, "What was the most difficult thing for you to overcome in Harlem?" He replied, "Not having a mother. But I believe any one can overcome any obstacle, even not having a mother." I believed my children could survive without me. I envisioned in my mind the faces of my children. My arms wanted to hold them close and cry until I was exhausted. I knew if I aborted my baby I would always wonder what he or she would have looked like. When I looked at my children, I would be reminded of the one I didn't have and would be rendered a mental cripple of a mother. It felt like revelation.

The cloud was lifted from my mind and I decided that beautiful sunny day I would have my baby. If I died, my family would be taken care of by the Lord. If I lived, my joy would be full. A peace came to my

soul that I had not known for weeks. I knew this decision was right for me.

So I opted for neither abortion nor chemotherapy. My post-pregnancy scans showed no evidence of cancer. I enjoyed remission for nearly four years. Though I have since had a recurrence, undergone surgery, chemo and radiation therapy, I have been in remission again for five years. The love, unity, and joy my little boy has brought to me and members of my family have been worth the price. Justin will always be a constant reminder to us of how much we love each other.

It's true 1986 was not a good year. But 1995 is the best. Nothing in the world is more exciting than my eight-year-old putting his arms around my neck and whispering in my ear, "I love you, Mommy." And nothing is more comforting than knowing the spirit speaks in a thousand small ways about our deepest needs and that his answers are always right.