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OPINION

Cancer awareness and hell-wishing

By Christa Brown

The American Cancer Society estimates that the year 2011 will bring 230,480 new cases of invasive breast cancer among women in the United States. I'm one of those cases.

For me, what was even worse than learning I had cancer was learning that I needed a mastectomy. Even now, though I'm six months down the road and feeling strong, the pain of that day is still raw.

Despite years of hypervigilance, mammograms and ultrasounds, I wound up with both invasive ductal and invasive lobular tumors at the same time. So this beast of a disease still took my breast.

On the very day when I learned about the second tumor, which limited my surgical options, I received this missive from a self-identified Southern Baptist:

"When life goes sour for you, YOU WILL KNOW WHY!"

It arrived with the usual slew of "you're going to hell" and "God will have judgment on you" sorts of messages. Baptists were filling my inbox with rage because I had blogged about a Washington youth pastor who, according to a news report, "confessed on tape to raping a 12-year-old girl." Despite the reported confession, the pastor's supporters were certain of his innocence and determined to make sure I knew. Suffice it to say that the guy recently pled guilty.

In case after case, ever since I began speaking out about Baptist clergy sex abuse and cover-ups, I have reaped heaps of Baptist wrath. So, apart from the lousy timing of it, there was nothing unusual about this particular missive. I figure everyone's life goes "sour" at some point, and so, given how many of these ugly messages I get, even the coincidence of the timing wasn't startling.

Nevertheless, it gave me pause to receive such vitriol on a day when I was in such pain. Not for one second did I believe my breast cancer was indicative of God's wrath, but I pondered the nature of human wrath and the question of why good people use religion to justify their own rage.

What is it about religious belief that often seems to fuel such harshness? What is it about religious belief that can foster such fear-based responses? And what is it about religious belief that blinds people to the crimes of their ministers?

If I could answer these questions, I feel like I would solve some great mystery. But of course, I can't. Heck, I can't even figure out why so many of these vitriol-senders seem to have a stuck caps-key.

I also pondered what it must feel like to hate someone so much that you would wish them to hell and would invoke God on your side -- as if any human actually held such power. I have tried to put myself in their shoes, but ultimately I realized I couldn't. Even if I wanted to return hate for hate, and to say "go to hell" right back, it wouldn't hold the same meaning.

Many of the Baptists who send me such missives have made clear that they believe in a very literal hell. In fact, they often seem to revel in that belief, delighting in the details of the agony that they claim I will eternally endure because I have spoken out about anointed



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men of God and church cover-ups. "Not even Aloe Vera Gel will help you," said one message.

I laughed at that one, but mostly, such hell-wishing messages infuse me with sadness. When did the faith of my youth become so permeated with meanness?

I cannot possibly understand the feeling behind these messages because, for me, hell holds a more metaphorical meaning. Personally, I don't believe that humans will physically experience the pain of their flesh forever burning, and so I am simply incapable of wishing such a thing on anyone. You can't wish for what you don't believe in.

But what I can wish for -- and pray for -- is that faith may ultimately work to foster human compassion and care rather than human hate.

I'm now a breast cancer survivor, and I'm also a survivor of Baptist clergy sex abuse. Life seems more precious than ever, and if there's one thing I know for sure, it is this: There is no time for hate. Not for any of us.

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Please make sure that you and your loved ones get their mammograms. If you have a family history of breast cancer or dense breast tissue, talk to your doctor about additional screening methods. The life you save may be your own.

Christa Brown is the author of *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang*. After a 25-year career as an appellate attorney, she is now pursuing a Ph.D. at Liff School of Theology where she is on medical leave.

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