

FUNERAL HOMILY
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A reading from the Gospel according to John...

Jesus said to the crowd, "All that the Father gives me shall come to me. No one who comes will I ever reject. Because it is not to do my own will that I have come down from heaven, but to do the will of Him who sent me. It is the will of Him who sent me that I choose nothing of what He has given me, rather that I should raise it up on the last day. Indeed this is the will of my Father that everyone who looks upon his Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

There is a truth that is good for us to reflect on at the time of death. That truth is that:

every human person is special
everyone is unique
nobody ever takes anybody else's place

We're reminded of that as we go to the scriptures at the very beginning of the Book of Genesis in the story of creation which we have all heard many times. The story tells how God first made the light and then divided the waters and made the dry land appear. He put the sun and the moon and the stars in the sky . . . the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals on the earth. The story tells how God looked down on all the things that He made, and God said, "They are good." But there was no creature that resembled God Himself.

And then the story tells us that God made us people in His own image and likeness. And even in death _____(name)_____ bears that image and likeness of God. He/she bears it in the kind of way that God chose to share with him/her and nobody else on the face of the earth. That is why he/she is special and why he/she cannot be replaced.

That image of God is also a power. . . it is the power to love. Our love brings us our greatest joys . . . our love brings us our deepest sorrow; because when we love, in some very beautiful and mysterious way, our lives and our feelings are interwoven with the lives of other people. When something happens to them, it's as if it happens to us as well. And that is why when we love, we feel more deeply both the joys and the sorrows. At the time of death, our very love itself is a major part of the grief that we feel.

Our love as people is partly possessive...wanting, needing, drawing into ourselves. That is not bad...it is human. God knows that it is not good for us to be alone. That is why God puts deep in the way we love a need for other people. That is why when someone dies whom we have known and loved in this way— someone with whom we've shared so many different kinds of experiences . . . some of them good ones and some of them bad ones—all of those experiences have etched that person very deeply in our being. That is why when this person dies, it is as if a part of our heart, our soul, is torn out. It leaves the emptiness, the wound, we call grief.

Our grief so often becomes more complicated. A temptation so many of us have at the time of death is to reproach ourselves or put guilt on ourselves. I might remember something I've said and say, *Why did I say that? I don't know how to make that right. I can't think of how to do it. I feel the guilt.* Perhaps I remember what I've done . . . maybe a number of things that I've done. I say: *that was thoughtless. If you're like me, you will also have to say that that was even kind of mean. How do I make that right? I can't think of a way to do it. I feel the guilt.*

Perhaps I remember what I never did say. It's too late to tell him/her now. I feel the guilt. If any of you are putting guilt on yourselves or reproaching yourselves for any reason whatsoever, please do not do that. All of us people are beautiful, but we all have rough edges. We clash and hurt each other from time to time. That does not mean we are bad; it means we are human.

Again, I ask you, if any of you today are putting guilt on yourselves or reproaching yourselves for any reason whatsoever, please do not do that. It does no good for __(name)__, it does no good for us, and it pays no honor to God. It is one of the things with which we must so often cope at the time of death. The wonderful thing is, if we don't put guilt on ourselves, then we become able to learn from the mistakes we have made. We should never say to ourselves: *If I really believed more, if I had a deeper faith, if I were more religious, I wouldn't feel all these many crazy things going on inside of me.* That is not true. The grace of God and our faith does not take these human things away.

The best example is Jesus. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We also believe that Jesus is a human being, just like us. Jesus felt and experienced all the same things that we do. The scriptures remind us that Jesus cried. It tells us about the time His friend Lazarus died. His friend was dead, Jesus hurt, and Jesus cried...just like we do.

Jesus knew loneliness too. Loneliness is a major part of what grief is all about. Remember on the cross before He died, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me." Jesus felt alone and rejected. His father, of course, had not abandoned Him; but at that moment, Jesus felt all of the pain and all of the anguish of total aloneness. And when we go to Jesus with our loneliness, our grief, our hurts—whatever it is we feel—we are going to someone who knows. And Jesus knows because Jesus felt them too.

If all these things are present in Jesus, then they are certainly going to be present in us. The grace of God and our faith does not take these human things away. Our faith does something beautiful for us though. Our faith enables us to look at death in a deeper and a truer kind of way. Our faith reminds us that death is not an ending of life, but a change...a very radical change to be sure.

____(name)____ has died and he/she will no longer live in our world anymore in the ways to which we are accustomed. That kind of living is gone forever; and because that is the truth, we must accept it. But that does not mean that ____ (name)____ is no more, that the existence of this person whom we've know and loved has been wiped away. For at this very moment, God is in the process of raising him/her up to a new kind of living that will never end.

Jesus was the first. Jesus died, too, just as truly as ____ (name)____ has died and each one of us will die one day. But Jesus rose from the dead. When we say *Jesus rose from the dead*, we do not mean that he came back to life. We mean something very much more than that. We mean that Jesus was changed and transformed from the kind of living we know here to the new and glorious life of His father. We believe that Jesus lives today.

Look beside me at the large candle that is burning. We light that candle every Easter Sunday. That burning candle is a symbol of our faith; and it says to us: **Jesus lives**. We light that candle again today, but today we light it for ____ (name)____. For the very same faith that says **Jesus lives**, also says ____ (name)____ **lives with Him**. That is the truth too; not so obvious, but just as true. That is why there is—though it sounds strange to say so at a funeral—a place for a certain kind of peace. That place might be very small, quite covered over, and difficult to find; but it can be there.

Our love as people is not only possessive, wanting, and needing, but also giving and sharing. Isn't it true that when we love someone and they receive a beautiful gift, we feel it too? ____ (name)____ has received a beautiful gift from God: the beginning of the risen life with Jesus. We say, ____ (name)____, we

miss you, we mourn, we grieve, we're empty and heavy, but we are glad for you.

We also think of our God who makes everything possible. When _____ (name) _____ died, he/she did not die alone. As he/she was going through the gates of death and all the people and all the things around him/her were receding, God was there to say, _____ (name) _____, *I love you. I've loved you a long, long time, through good times and bad, through joys and sorrows. I've loved you through things which nobody in the whole world knows about, except you and Me. I'm not about to leave you now. I'm here to take your hand and lead you through death to a new kind of life with Me.*

Death is scary for us. Understandably so. When we remember that at the time we die, we are met by God who loves us and how does God love us? Just as we are. God knows our sins, our faults, our mistakes, our flaws. God knows that sometimes we are even kind of weird. God knows all those things about us and just loves us.

When we start to remember that at the time we die we are met by our God who loves us in this way, we don't have to be quite so afraid. We feel all these many different things going on inside of us today—and it is good for us to feel them even though they hurt—because it is a part of being human.

At the same time that we feel the pain, the hurt, and the emptiness, we should also try to find that small place of peace. Let us be glad for _____ (name) _____ for the beautiful gift he/she is already beginning to enjoy. And finally, today, we celebrate the goodness of our God, our God who loves us so much that **He will not allow even death to have the final word!**