

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Nov 18th 2014

November is the month that typically reminds the Catholic community of that most central aspect of human life: that our loved ones and friends (and ultimately ourselves) die. This clearly is not a fact that we are eager to deal with, but inevitably can become a regular feature our lives especially as we age.

How we deal with this inevitability differs with each person, but our faith gives us ample opportunity to respond to it. Death confronts us with a jumble of emotional responses. I am struck, for example by parents who lose a child or a young adult well before she/he is supposed to be removed from our midst. The inevitable jangles of our feelings around a loved one's passing shake us to the core.

Three revered Jesuits in our community have died since mid-July. Two struggled with illnesses that ultimately took them before what most would figure to be their "proper" time. But one died so suddenly and unexpectedly it left our community, his friends, family, colleagues and students at a loss for words to express their grieving. A sudden and unexpected heart attack (I presume) ended a life well before its "time." A gifted and renowned scholar, superior teacher, gifted spiritual guide, brother and friend was removed from our midst in the blink of an eye.

How to deal with an unexpected reality like that? My own response was the ill-employed use of denial. The morning after his death our bulletin board revealed starkly the letters "RIP" above his name. I observed these notations for several seconds and concluded, "that's wrong." I had seen him maybe two hours before he died! This can't be right. Once again, I insisted with myself, "no;" then I read the typed note underneath his name from our Rector. Reality forced its way through my thick denials.

Even at his wonderfully rich funeral when one might presume we are best able to see what we don't want to see with some equanimity, I found myself back to my familiar denial mode. Death sure does play tricks on us.

The expressions of sympathy and cards of condolence from our friends and associates helped to deal with the truth and invite us gently back to the reality of this man's goodness. Their support clearly helps put a healing balm on the sharp/harsh fact of his death.

Each Sunday we pray the words of our creed which reminds us of God's spectacular love for us. And the phrases of that creed rush upon us mostly without much thought or reflection. And among them is

this staple of our faith: “(I believe in) the Communion of Saints.” Our friend’s physical presence to us is gone for now but he continues to be present to us in God’s own spirit through a communion with one another that transcends death.

The crushing emotions that elbow their way in to us somehow get eased in the comforting truth of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Our feelings may be bruised long term, but the faith in Jesus’ actions FOR us and the presence to us of our loved ones’ eternally living spirit salves our scars and helps us to move forward.

So this November, 2014, let us remember with love our own loved ones and recall again the meaning for us of the Communion of Saints. Pope Francis in his homily on All Saints day noted that we are part of a family that spans time and eternity.

We rejoice in our sisters and brothers (those still with us and those who are with God in eternal peace), and we are grateful for their lives that touch us deeply. November is a time to be quietly sad for our losses, but at the same time to be filled with joy for the resurrection awe that is now shared by those we love.

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