

Funeral Homily for Michael Slevin

The philosopher John Stuart Mill stated,
“I have learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires,
rather than attempting to satisfy them.”

When I came across this quote it made me think of Mike.

Partly because in the years that I knew Mike,

I knew that he lived in a very simple way—

almost monk-like in his ascetic simplicity.

But especially because, at heart, Mike was a philosopher.

He and I had several exchanges—

most of them through letters and emails—

about the intersection of theology and philosophy.

His thirst and desire for enlightenment, for understanding went deep.

In bible study, he would always probe for meaning

and understanding with philosophical rigor and knowledge.

But Mike was also a poet and he had a poet’s love of words.

We will miss our resident philosopher and poet very much—

though I’m sure that would have surprised Mike to hear it.

After attending bible study and Sunday morning services

for about a year, Mike wrote to me

about his decision to join our congregation.

He began his letter this way—

There is a world of difference between presence and participation.

He wrote that after being “present” with us here at Holy Trinity,

listening attentively, “seeking instruction on how to be a better person,”

and wanting to learn how to “connect” with people with more ease,

he had a kind of revelation just before the Christmas of 2015.

It came by way of a gift from a member of Holy Trinity

who said to him, “This is for you, from all of us here.”

Mike was completely overwhelmed.

That gift was an experience of grace for Mike.

In the most beautiful poetry he wrote,

*“the lesson plan has been revealed to me: distance and movement are
handmaidens as ancient as light and darkness.”*

It was revealed to him that he must make the effort to close the distance between himself and others, It was time for him to move out of what he called this hermitage, his self-willed exile in which he had “entombed” himself. It was time for him to move into the light of participation. And he did participate in our life together here as much as his health would allow him to. And we are all so blessed he did—though, again, I know Mike would be surprised to hear it and would protest against it.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Mike thoroughly enjoyed contemplating this glorious prologue to the Gospel of John with its undertones of the Greek philosophy about “the logos”— which is the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering creation, and giving it form and meaning. You could say that Mike’s observation that there is a world of difference between presence and participation is one way to sum up the message of John’s prologue— The Word is always present but the Word is always in participation— from the very beginning to now and to eternity— God’s Word, God’s life, God’s love shines in the darkness— it is a light that no darkness can overcome, however mightily we might try to extinguish it. It is just as Paul—another theologian and philosopher Mike appreciated—wrote to the church in Rome: Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The divine reason implicit in all of creation is divine love— present and in participation in every being.

What is more, if we continue to read to the end of John's prologue, the lesson plan that Mike discovered for himself is further laid out for all of us:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . .

God's love bridged the distance and moved right into the neighborhood.

What God creates, God loves;

and what God loves, God loves everlastingly.

That is the light no darkness can overcome.

This is the truth that sought and took hold of Mike—and all of us—whether we know it or not,

whether we acknowledge it or not,

whether we understand it or not, or even accept it or not.

The steadfast love of God never ceases to be present and actively participating in the world.

As our texts for this service tell us—

It's love that removes the shroud of death cast over us—

and that includes the “little deaths” we inflict on ourselves.

It's love that wipes away the tears from our faces and gives us dignity.

It's love that binds our broken hearts and lives, and, ultimately love that saves us.

That love was and is and will always be embodied by Christ.

One of the things Mike learned over these years

as he participated in his lesson plan,

was that we must be willing to see more than we think is there.

We must be willing to let ourselves be surprised—

just as Mike was surprised by grace

right here in this sanctuary four years ago.

We need to learn that our lives are grounded

in the everlasting love of God, grounded in the promises of Christ—

given to us, not because we have earned them or deserve them,

but just because God loves what God has created no matter what.

This morning we come together to grieve and to mourn Mike's death,
but not without hope
and not without giving thanks with joy to God for him.
We keep the eyes of our heart open,
just as Mike so bravely did,
even though he once referred to himself as "the cowardly lion."

If we do, our hope will be renewed,
our confidence that there is a way forward even when
we can't know the way
and when we don't see it,
or even when we don't believe it.
You see, life is far too sacred
and the love of God far too strong,
for death to have the final word.

Mike came to believe this.

That is why his favorite hymn was an Easter hymn and his favorite
verse of that hymn was this:

Thomas, where were you on that evening?

"I'll not believe unless I see."

Christ comes again, and every Lord's day:

"Touch me and see; have faith in me."

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Our challenge today is to see Mike's life
and our own lives in the light of that everlasting love,
in the light of that deep and eternal truth.

Let Mike's own discovery be yours as well.

There is a world of difference between presence and participation.

The love of God is always present with us, active and participating,
and always seeking to make all things new.

And God invites us to be present and
participate fully in all of it, too.