

A Final Act of Grace

Sunday Potluck

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Prepared Text of the sermon

Returning home from Florida on February 5, we entered the home of our kids, Lynn and Keith Mast, as the telephone rang. It was a call from Gerry Rodarmer, saying that Sam Bacon had died that day and Janet was trying to get hold of me to conduct Sam's funeral. A few days later, Feb. 10, Don Nagtzaam died. On March 19 Roger Vander Meulen died. On April 15 Allen Ruiter died. In the meantime I spoke at a memorial gathering for John Nemenye, who was loosely related to CCC. From February to April, I have conducted five funerals for CCC members. And, in preparing those services, I gained some insight into the reason we are here today. I hope as I relate the experience of preparing for and conducting those services, I might enable us all to understand why we are here today and hopefully enable us to move on to a positive and joyful future.

I suspect we have present today persons in various relationships to CCC. Most of you, I suspect, no longer are part of that community; some of you are; some of you are still trying to figure out where you are. So hear me as I tell a tale of four funerals.

As those of you know who have been at a number of the funerals I've conducted, I weave into one a eulogy and a biblical message. I always try to set the person forth as they were in the context of a collage of Scripture, finding in Scripture something that marked the person and is also a ground of hope and source of comfort.

In the case of Sam Bacon and Roger Vander Meulen, it was the time of their deaths that gave me a clue as to how to proceed.

Sam died on "Fat Tuesday," the climax of Mardi Gras, the day before Ash Wednesday. The funeral three days later was at the beginning of Lent. I thought of the passage in Genesis 2 where God takes a scoop of earth and forms the man, breathing into him the breath of life and then the disobedience in Genesis 3 and the sentence on the guilty couple – "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return" – the words we speak over each worshiper on Ash Wednesday as we apply the ashes on the forehead. Sam and Janet came to us from Fountain Street and I had one of Duncan's favorite poems, "This Quiet Dust", which seemed to put it all in context.

Roger Vander Meulen died during Holy Week – the pain of loss and grieving appropriate for the solemnity and darkness of that annual observance. But his funeral was on Easter Monday. Again it was the observance of the Christian year that created the context – again I used Genesis 2:4 – Dust – God’s act of creation and the promise to dust thou shalt return. But now it was Easter Monday. I turned to St. Paul in the great Resurrection Chapter 15 of First Corinthians. Paul struggled to bring to expression his assurance of resurrection – Flesh and blood (or dust) is mortal and the mortal cannot inherit the Kingdom. The mortal must put on immortality. I told the story of the butterfly emerging from the caterpillar whose immune cells fight the new imaginal cells – fighting, as it were, the transformation into the new form, and are finally overcome as the butterfly emerges – a creature no longer fated to crawl on earth but gaining wings to fly!

I need not go on with Paul’s claim. I cite the services of Sam and Roger to illustrate how much the annual observance of the Christian Year provides the context for our life and our death – How meaningful to work with the ancient observance to bring meaning to life and death. There is a framework within which we have lived our lives and which gives insight into death.

I turn now to the funerals of Don and Allen. Different as they were, there was that which was the same though manifested in different ways. Don did beautiful cabinetry work throughout the church – every room contains some sign of his skill and devotion. And every Sunday in the choir – loving the creation of beautiful music and liturgy.

Allen loved the church as well – was faithful in worship and for years set the Lord’s Table. For these two I am reminded of the Psalmist’s love for Jerusalem, for the Temple, for the altar – the place of special manifestation of the Presence of God.

Psalm 42:3 and Psalm 84 come to mind. In Psalm 42, the poet is in a situation of exile, longing for the courts of the Lord. He carries on a dialogue in his soul:

Why are you cast down, my soul...
Hope in God; I will yet praise him,
my help and my God.
O send out your light and your truth;
Let them lead me,
let them bring me to your Holy Hill.
..then I will go to the altar of God,
my exceeding joy.

Psalm 84 is a song of pilgrimage to Jerusalem:

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of Hosts

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

“I would rather be a doorkeeper,” or, as someone has translated the phrase – “linger at the threshold.”

The people of Israel knew God was present everywhere, but Jerusalem was special – a place set apart, a place where the symbolism, the ministries of the Temple, the Holy of Holies were – and their whole faith and devotion longed to be there.

That is the tale of four funerals. Why do I recap those services? Because of a profound insight that overwhelmed me. It wasn’t really something I hadn’t known before; but it was as if what I really knew struck me with clarity.

In the case of Sam and Roger, it was the annual observance of the Christian Year. In the case of Don and Allen, it was the sacred space itself – the literal place where we gathered replete with the symbolism of our Christian observance, that was the focus – the place of praise, celebration, worship, liturgy and prayer.

And it struck me: This is what we have lost. It is for that reason that we grieve. We grieve because we have lost the observances and the sacred place that framed our daily lives. *And it is painful; we have experienced a death of sorts.*

Now, lest I be misunderstood, let me be very clear that I am well aware that what we shared together in community was a human creation.

It was in July of 2000 that I preached a sermon entitled “Religion Made on Earth”. That sermon was not the beginning of an understanding but the conclusion of a path we had been journeying on for a long time: “Religion is a human phenomenon, and what I want to say this morning in this first message is very simple, but if you really hear me, it’s very radical. You won’t hear it often in church, but I believe that it is simple and it is true: religion is made on earth; it is a human construct. Religion didn’t fall ready-made from heaven. There is no absolute religion with God’s stamp on it as over against all of the other religions practiced by the diversity of humankind. All religion is made on earth and is a human construct.

One might ask, ‘Well, isn’t it true?’

Is a sunset true: Is a poem true? Of course, it’s true. It is true in the sense that it puts us in communion with God. It satisfies the hunger of our heart. It elicits from us what is noble and best. It gives us a reason for being. It gives us a hope. It enables us to go on to tomorrow. Of course, it’s true. But religion is not true in the sense that a chemical formula is true, not in the sense that the hard stuff of the natural sciences is true. It is not empirical and verifiable. Religion is a judgment call. Religion is a

choice. Religion is a response to a story. It is engagement in worship and community; it is the following of a way of life. Religion can be good or less good, but not true or false in a sense in which we deal with true and false in a world marked by the scientific method, empirical investigation. No, religion is a human construct and all of them alike are made on earth.

With that recognition on our part that it was not the case that we had found God's stamp and our worship was a direct translation of heaven's worship, *what we claimed was only that this was our story and our way*: mining the rich treasures of the Christian Church, we found a meaningful way through liturgy, sacrament, symbol and aesthetic expression to come into the presence of the Holy Mystery, the Mystery of God.

And we did it well! Meaningful liturgy gathered around the church year, intelligent interpretation of the biblical story while re-imagining the faith for our time, exultant, aesthetically uplifting experience in music and other artistic expression. It was quite wonderful really – the moving experience of transcendence that lifted us out of ourselves to experience the sacred mystery. No one was more responsible for the beautiful offerings week after week than our Mr. Bryson whose gifts would have made Riverside Church in New York City proud, and the whole pastoral team made their contribution.

But it was not either true or false, right or wrong. *It was our chosen way*; it lifted us into the presence of the Mystery that is God.

And again: it is no more. There has been a death and we grieve. A death because that experience week by week, season by season, year in and year out shaped us – spiritual formation we name it – at the core of our being we are deeply imprinted by scripture, song, liturgy, symbol, the sacrament. These observances have formed us and put us in touch with life's ultimate mystery and meaning.

But, if we claim only that what we had was our chosen way, the obverse of that is that now there is another chosen way being practiced, and it is not right or wrong; it is different. Rather than mining the rich veins of Christian tradition, there is the incorporation of other traditions and an intentional emphasis on current social issues – There is an intelligent address of issues that for us were the subject of Perspectives and Wednesday Adult Education – but not centered in the corporate worship experience. And attempting to be simply descriptive, I would point out there is little experience of worship, nor is that desired. Being lost in wonder, love and praise is not the intended end.

This is not wrong; it is different. And that is where the community has moved and having moved there, it is not of interest to me because it lacks the reason I worship – to have my being inspired and lifted into the presence of the Holy. And that is approached differently; it doesn't work for me. There is a loss; I must simply

acknowledge that. That is why we are here this morning, gathering with others who have likewise experienced that loss – a kind of death.

As a group you have gone through stages: *At first there was anger*. That is understandable even if it is not helpful and is finally self-destructive. Some of you were part of a committee that approached the Board of Trustees with your concerns but received no real empathy. There was no constructive dialogue.

And there have been various attempts to see if something new might arise. But that has had its problems. This group isn't easily satisfied. We really had it all and that will not be easily re-created.

And we have given our lives, our energy, our treasure over many years. For most of us the idea of beginning again is forbidding.

Finally, here we are because we long for community – and, since all we can salvage are ongoing networks of friends who share a story, a history, an experience of God, that still is the center of our lives.

I told you the tale of four funerals because it became so powerfully clear to me why we grieved. We have sustained a great loss and it is not going to be re-created. We have experienced a loss of what was, what we loved and is no more – what will not come back.

And what do we do with our grief? We *celebrate life*, we *remember*, we *give thanks* and we *go on*. But, perhaps for our own spiritual well being, there is one more thing we need to do – one final act of Grace.

Celebrating what was, what was shared in community, remembering with joy, we will heal. But finally the confirmation of all that we experienced will be evidenced to the extent we can bless and affirm that ongoing community that takes new shape and form.

A new community is forming. New directions are being forged. Positive engagement with the ongoing societal structures and cultural movements is happening. New people are finding a spiritual home and many who shared years of experience with us are being blessed and challenged in new ways.

All of that we affirm without denial of our loss. But as we affirm we will heal and find our way however that may emerge.

It is to a final act of grace that I call you in the confidence that
all will be well, all will be well,
all manner of things will be well.