

St. James Lutheran Church
Brian Hamming Memorial Service
September 18, 2008
Richard Holmer

First Reading: Revelation 21:207
Psalmody: Psalm 23
Gospel: Matthew 11:25-30

It is a perilous thing to be born into this world. The world in which we live is fraught with dangers and threats and uncertainties which come at us from all directions. The illusion of ongoing security can be quickly shattered by sudden and traumatic events.

Likewise, it is a perilous thing to bring children into this world. For along with all the blessings children bring, they also increase our exposure to the slings and arrows of misfortune. We cannot guarantee the safety of our sons and daughters any more than we can guarantee our own.

We live in a broken and imperfect world—and at times that brokenness pierces our own lives, our own hearts. When a child dies, we are shattered and confused. Every death brings sorrow. Yet the loss of a child is especially disconcerting because it confounds the natural order of things: Parents don't expect to outlive their kids.

So we are grieving and dismayed. It's hard to understand this loss, this tragedy. We're not able to make sense of it.

It's good to admit that we don't understand it—that we can't make sense of it. Later in this service, one of our prayer petitions will ask for help as we struggle in our confusion. It's a prayer I've been praying all week.

“Help us; we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection to life everlasting.”

When it's hard to understand, we lean on our faith.

Some things we understand too well. We understand why we will miss Brian. Peggy & Mark shared a number of memories that capture the goodness of his life.

When we were putting together the notice to be printed in the paper, rather than include a list of his many accomplishments, Bruce said, “Just say he was a scholar, an athlete and an environmentalist.” A pretty good summary! Such a bright mind, who graduated from Princeton. A tremendous athlete who competed at the top level. Devoted to maintaining and enhancing the goodness of creation.

Beyond what he did, it is who Brian was as a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin, a teammate, a friend that will live on in ‘so many hearts.’

A memory I cherish happened right here at St. James. Brian was on the shy side, not usually outspoken or wanting to call attention to himself. But I remember a time he prayed out loud with great emotion and conviction—giving thanks to God for Carl's amazing recovery and healing from his long bout with Guillain-Barré Syndrome. It was a prayer full of love and gratitude. And it echoed a healing he longed for in his own life.

Brian struggled to find a peace that would last. He fought against the darkness that could quickly descend and overwhelm him. When we selected hymns for this service, Bruce noted how accurately the third verse of our opening hymn described Brian:

“Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come.”

In our grief we also struggle. Where is there a peace that is sure and dependable? Jesus speaks a clear word to those whose hearts are weighed down with a heavy load of grief.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens—come, and I will give you rest.”

The gospel promise is a promise of rest and peace. That promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in the life to come:

“God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...”

God really does welcome us just as we are—his peace is offered to all. Brian is now abiding in that peace—he is free at last. Perils and traumas and demons can no longer torment him. He has at last the peace which this world cannot give. He is at home with our Savior.

So I don't say this lightly or glibly, but the truth is there is no longer a need to worry about Brian. I say this because the promise is true. He's with the Good Shepherd—at rest in the green and verdant pastures.

As for the rest of us, we are still making our way through this troubled and confusing world. We are still reeling from the shock and pain of such a loss. So, what about us who are trying to make it, day by day on this side of heaven?

I want to share two thoughts:

1. First I remind you, we have a God who knows exactly what we're dealing with—a God who has felt the pain and grief of wrenching loss. God our Father saw his own Son suffer and die on a cross. Our God understands how this world, which can be so beautiful, can also break your heart. God not only sees our grief and sorrow—he also shares it. Ours is a God well acquainted with pain and sorrow.

Know this:

We have a God who will not forsake us—who walks with us through this dark and dismal valley. We have a God whose peace and goodness and mercy are with us now—and await us in abundance on that far shore.

2. The other thing is that we have work to do, good and lasting work. Tony Dungy is the coach of the Super Bowl Champion Indianapolis Colts—and he is also the father of a son who took his own life. In his book, Quiet Strength, Dungy quotes Booker T. Washington:

“If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.”

In the crucible of his own pain and grief, Tony Dungy discovered what others have come to know and believe: When we are down and discouraged and disheartened, the way forward is in caring for others.

Dungy speaks from experience, and he draws on some powerful words from scripture:

We are hard pressed—but not crushed
perplexed (for sure—bewildered!)—but not driven to despair
knocked down—but not destroyed.

Even when battered and beat down, we have the capacity to reach out. And in lifting others up, our own spirits are lifted. It is through actively and devotedly loving others that we gain a stronger sense of the love God has for us all.

I've seen this very thing happening right here these past few days:

people reaching out and caring,
supporting and sharing,
doing what ever they can to lift up those whose hearts are broken
a tremendous outpouring of love.

I say: keep it up. You see, the peace God gives to us in these days is not the peace of sitting back and doing nothing. It is the peace that comes doing what is worth doing, what needs doing—what is good and right to do.

Psalm 23 speaks of a goodness and mercy that follow us all our days. You and I can be individual instruments of God's goodness and mercy—each in our own way, bearing one another's burdens and lifting up those who have been brought low.

Jesus calls us—especially now, when we're more apt to listen—and he offers peace and rest this world cannot give. This is not rest the way the world thinks of rest. For rest he offers the yoke of service to others and the burden of loving with all our hearts. And Christ assures us of this: his yoke is easy and his burden is light—because he is always there to help us bear it.

Jesus invites us all to come to him just as we are—and he assures us we will find rest for our souls by loving one another the way he loves us.

Amen.