

November 4, 2012

Mark 12.28-34

On this first Sunday in the month of Holy Souls I bring you three thoughts, three beads for your prayer rope: the scribe, the cemetery, the segment on public radio. I will spend the most time on the third bead, but it really needs the first two to make any sense. Each bead is equally important, even if the third one makes the best story.

The scribe. He is not far from the kingdom of God, a position we hope to share with him. He asks the question, “What’s really important?” Jesus answers. The scribe welcomes the answer as if it were his own. Not perfunctorily, not intellectually, but at a deep level, in an embrace by the heart. What’s important? Loving God and loving neighbor? I will put all my efforts into those tasks.

The cemetery. It is our custom to formally process to the monastic cemetery on this day and bless the graves. This is strangely enjoyable: the autumn colors, the long walk up the drive, the winding path through the woods; the well-tended graves, the wreaths on the headstones, the reading of the names; the prayers, the vestments, the singing. There is an ecclesiastical indulgence for such a visit to pray for the souls of those who lie there. This is precious, even when done at arms’ length--which is the case unless we desperately long for the presence of someone buried there.

The segment on public radio. Every few years a feature comes on while I am driving that nearly makes me run off the road. Two years ago it was a segment on Willie McGee, executed unjustly in Mississippi sixty years ago for the crime of loving the wrong person. Recently, as I drove home from a Saturday vigil mass, I heard an interview with a German photographer named Walter Schels. Because he was afraid of death (as most of us, deep down, are), he developed a project, *Life before Death*, in which he would photograph dying persons. The participants gave him permission to do so, and then to follow up with a similar photograph, shortly after death but before the undertaker arrived. Most of the volunteers were in the final stages of cancer, and in hospice care. There is a gallery of some of the photos online. He exhibited them with small verbal stories of what the dying person had to say. The pictures were eerily beautiful. The first picture often showed the gauntness of suffering. In the second, their eyes were closed, but I cannot say they exactly looked “asleep.” Rather, there was an awe, a majesty about the stillness and the emptiness.

It was the words they spoke that were really resonant. I thought of the biblical line in Hebrews 11 about innocent Abel, whose life ended prematurely, “though dead, he still speaks.”

Similarly, these dying people spoke to me. Klara, 83, said, “I just bought a new refrigerator. If only I had known!”

Peter: “I never had any vices, and I’m only 64.”

Henry, 52: “My friends brought beer and had a little party, watched the football game with me. At the door some said, ‘get well soon, buddy.’ Don’t they get it? They didn’t want to hear about the distress I feel.”

The most anguished was Gerda, 68. “My whole life was work, work, work, and now I am being cheated of my retirement. Can’t death wait?” “But, mama,” the daughter says, “we will be reunited in heaven someday.” “Don’t talk to me about heaven. Where is God *now*?”

The open-ended quality of that haunting cry is very powerful. It echoes Jesus’ words from Psalm 22 on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The expression of despair should not be papered over with our pious answers, the survivors’ need to console themselves when a friend stands at the abyss. But there are several of the photographer’s subjects who seem to transcend the terrible dilemma of death being near. They do so by answering, uniquely and personally, the scribe’s question, “What is important? What is essential?”

William, 57, had been a loner most of his rather ordinary life. “The diagnosis came as a real shock. I’m not that old, and I’d only thought about life. I guess I was unreflective. But I came to terms with it fairly easily. I savor each thing, each day. The birthday cake they gave me here, each cloud in the sky, each flower in the vase. Suddenly everything matters.” We can wonder if William’s intensity is sustainable in ordinary life. But we can also envy, admire, and try to imitate his contentment.

Rose, 47, was the youngest of those photographed. “It’s ridiculous really. Only now that I am dying do I really want to live. Before I had been unhappy so much of the time. But now I am at peace with everyone. I don’t even blame myself. If there were to be a miracle, and I could get well, I would be a hospice volunteer, because I have been treated so well here.” Death gave Rose the chance to be brutally honest with herself, and

that can bring liberation, the opportunity to shed unnecessary baggage, the possibility for peace not previously attained.

Finally, there is the one I choose to place last, the one spoke to me most deeply: Rita, 62. “When I found out the cancer was terminal, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I phoned my ex-husband. We had not spoken for twenty years. The divorce was very bitter; I withheld our child’s custody from him. When I called, he came right over. I don’t know why I waited so long to forgive and forget. I’m still fond of him, really. For weeks before this, all I wanted was to die, but now I’d love to be able to participate in life one last time.” Poignantly, she cannot.

This homily has no resolution except the reminder of the three beads: the scribe, the cemetery, the segment on public radio. The scribe asking, “what’s really important?” The cemetery saying, “Earthly life ends here.” And the various tentative voices from the photo exhibition. “I just bought that new refrigerator.” “They say, get well soon; don’t they get it?” “Where is God now?” “Suddenly everything matters.” “I am at peace with everyone, even myself.” “If there were to be a miracle, I would be a hospice volunteer.” “I don’t know why I waited so long to forgive and forget.” What will you say?

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