

Homily
Aunt Sadie's Funeral Mass
Wednesday June 24, 2009
Holy Cross Church – Dover, DE
Wisdom 3:1-9 – Romans 6:3-9 – John 11:17-27, 39-44

Once upon a time the Buddha was traveling on a dark isolated road. He encountered a bandit who drew his sword and in a threatening tone of voice said, "I intend to rob you of all your possessions." The Buddha, in a calm tone of voice said, "I have no possessions." Angered by what he heard the bandit said, "Then I will take your life." The Buddha, keeping his calm said, "May I make a dying request?" "Speak," said the bandit. "Please, with your sword, cut off a branch from that tree" pointing to a great Pine just a few yards away. With one swish of his sword the bandit cut off a branch and handed it to the Buddha. "Now," said the Buddha, "put it back together." The bandit laughed and mocked him saying, "You are stupid and foolish for no one can do that." "On the contrary," said the Buddha, "it is you who are stupid and foolish. Anyone with a sword and with as much anger in you can cut, maim and destroy. But what takes more ingenuity, calmness and creativity is to restore things to life. And you don't have those gifts." Awed by what he heard, the bandit dropped his sword and fell to his knees asking to become a disciple of the Buddha. "Please help me get free of my demons so I can learn these gifts." And his apprenticeship began that very moment.

The scripture lessons for this funeral Mass hint at the conflict between the inner demons that falsely trick us into destroying things and the gift of staying centered in faith that enables us to restore things to life.

The first reading is part of the "*Wisdom of Solomon*" written by his friends in his honor to strengthen the faith of Jews in Alexandria, Egypt. Living in the midst of pagans the Jewish community was faced with their faith being contaminated by the new society of an expanding self-centered world. It was a time of crisis for faith which some Jews had abandoned. Faced with anti-Semitism and retribution the Jews turned to Wisdom Literature to keep them centered in the faith of their ancestors as the Buddha stayed centered in the opening story.

The eight verses from chapter three address the issue of suffering and how it relates to those who have died. Without the prism of faith, the just seemed to have died. But with the prism of faith, they are really alive with God. Without faith their sufferings appear to be punishment. With faith their sufferings are tests of fidelity in which God recognizes those worthy of him. The just are full of hope for a blessed immortality and at the last

Judgment they shall enjoy the Kingdom of God. The wicked, however, have no hope for the future and their punishments begin even in this life.

Whereas viewing “suffering” differently for the just and the unjust is the issue in the Wisdom reading, liberation from death and sin is the issue for St. Paul in the second readings from his letter to the Romans. In the Wisdom of Solomon “faith” corrects seeing suffering as punishment. For St. Paul baptism transforms one's life from an “old person” living in sin to a “new person” saved by grace. For St. Paul being freed from the life of sin and death and being welcomed into the life of grace and glory is how that inner conflict is resolved. It is also part of the good news Aunt Sadie embraced through baptism. We recalled that spiritually transforming event in her life through the symbols of water, the funeral pall and the paschal candle at the opening rites of Mass. Because of the power of these symbols to grace her inner life this day actually began to unfold on the day of her baptism 90 years ago. That means our farewell to her is her hello to God. In between her life has been the changing of years and the changes of heart we all undergo that closes the door on an earthly life and opens the door to an eternal life.

Finally, the gospel story is not so much John's account of the raising of Lazarus, but how the glory of God will be served through his illness, burial and being called back to life. It is not only about giving an only brother back to two sisters who mourn, but it is the occasion for all who witness it to come to deeper faith through this manifestation of Christ's power.

There are actually two people raised to life in the story. First, Martha is in a tomb created by her anger and hurt. She and her sister sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was dying. Against all expectation he delays his return. When he does he is met with Martha's guilt trip that Jesus is to blame for the loss of her brother. *“If you had been here my brother would never have died.”* What she's not saying is, *“this is your fault.”* She is entombed by her own anger and hurt. These unhealthy emotions make her inner world small and narrow. Her heart is constricted by low levels of good oxygen. At this part of the story she is the classic blamer.

The turning point happens when Jesus changes her focus away from blame to him. Her confession that he is the resurrection and the life indicates she is free of her inner tombs of anger and punishment. Only then does Jesus call Lazarus back to life, back to life with two sisters and friends who have put their faith in Jesus. At the sound of Jesus' voice Lazarus emerges from the tomb still wrapped in burial cloths. After ministering to the living by calling Martha out of her tomb of hurt, Jesus ministers to the dead and calls Lazarus out of his tomb of death. What follows is the instruction, *“untie him and let him go free.”*

This story supports the universal conviction that physical death is the common lot of every human. But, the piece about faith in Jesus as the resurrection and the life will bring the believer to life again after death. *“Everyone who is alive and who believes in me”* is Jesus’ way of saying that the believer who possesses eternal life, and not the event of physical death, is the last word in their story.

Sadie was such a believer. She renewed her faith every time she accessed God through celebration of the Eucharist, either in church or at home, or expressing her contrition and renewing her heart through Reconciliation and recently through the Anointing of the Sick. In the breaking of the bread fullness was restored to a spiritually hungry heart. In the forgiveness of God wholeness was restored to a spiritually aching heart. In the anointing of the sick hope was restored to a spiritually frightened heart.

Four days before she slipped into unconsciousness I laid hands on her and she sang with me the refrain to *“Be Not Afraid.”* Then she said, *“Jesus show me the light and I will come home to you.”*

With these words she confirmed the Wisdom of Solomon that suffering had eternal worth and value. She confirmed the teaching of St. Paul to the Romans that baptism is not the end of life, but the new beginning of a journey of life that ends in glory. And like Lazarus she had her family to untie her so she could be called out of any tomb of regret and fear and be free to heed God’s call to eternal life.

What tombs are you living in? What unhealthy emotions are keeping you tied up like Lazarus being tied in burial cloths? That is not how Jesus wants us to live on this side of death. So, make his words, *“untie him and let him go free,”* a goal for getting yourself spiritually free on the inside so that like the bandit in the opening story new desires can be birthed in you, not to destroy people and things, but to restore them to life.

Today we rejoice that God has restored Aunt Sadie to the life that was hers before birth and after baptism. May this be the good news that we lean on today; that God can free us from having a hold on her so that God can hold us in tender loving care.

Amen.