

Cliff Embley's Funeral Homily:

Thursday February 14, 2013
St. Mary of the Assumption Church
Hockessin, DE

My maternal grandmother and three Aunts were masters at crocheting. Everybody in the family got two afghan's and we could pick our choice of colors. This lap afghan was a gift from my Aunt Eleanor to my dad when he was confined to a wheel chair for the last three years of his life. It has two shades of mauve and an off white. These three colors of wool blend together to give the afghan its eye-catching beauty.

I want to do something similar with the scripture lessons for this funeral Mass. I want to weave them together so they present a beautiful tapestry of Cliff's faithfulness to the God hidden in these readings.

They were chosen by Cliff months ago when we met in Bethany Beach to talk about this Mass of Christian Burial. When he asked me if I would preside, I said: "Okay. What else do you want me to know?" With his cryptic sense of humor he replied, "Well, I haven't picked a date yet!"

Now we know what date God in mind for a reunion with his faithful follower, Cliff. And this funeral liturgy is a celebration of their mutual faithfulness with each other. Let's see how the first reading a thread in that wonderful relationship.

Isaiah 25: 6-9

In pre-Christian Judaism the prophets spoke poignant but pertinent messages to Israel. Often their message cut to the heart. Like lean ground beef, it had little fat. But, in the midst of such cutting, the Prophets consoled Israel. The reading from Isaiah 25 is a hymn of consolation.

The mountain is not a peak like Mt. Washington in N.H. or Mt. Elbert in Colorado. It is the image of a celestial banquet as a symbol of eternal happiness and it can be traced back to Canaanite literature.

The banquet will happen despite the people's frequent sinfulness. God is bigger than their small hearts. It is the DNA of Almighty God not to let Israel's sins blot out divine mercy. The greatest sin was "unexpected death." So the prophet Isaiah comforts Israel with the words: "*The Lord will destroy death forever....will wipe away the tears from all faces.....any reproach will be removed.*"

This is only one of two references in Hebrew scripture that hints at life after death. The mystery of resurrection was foreign to pre-Christian Jews. But God inspires Isaiah to proclaim this Psalm of Thanksgiving and Praise as the thread of consolation that comprises a Gospel of Life. The prophet comforts Israel with the good news that there is more life after death. I believe Cliff was consoled by Isaiah's words which is why he

chose this reading. Consolation was one of the threads he allowed God to weave into his life as a gospel, especially as he was looking for meaning in his suffering.

Romans 6: 3-9

One thread we share in common with Cliff is that our life as a gospel begins with baptism. It represents, symbolically, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The infant, the adult descends into the baptismal bath, is covered with its waters and emerges to a new life, emerges a newly reborn person. Baptism begins the process of dying to ourself, to our selfish attitudes, to what makes us small, to our hatreds, our prejudices, our apathy, our unforgiveness. Baptism begins the process of letting go of dark inner threads of our flaws so the bright inner threads of ongoing conversion can dominate and shine. It is a process that never ends. Some of us, like me, let go kicking and screaming. Some of us, like Cliff, let go with ease and grace.

Whenever I experienced those virtues in him I was always reminded of a scene from the first "Batman" movie in 1989. Jack Nicholson played *"the Joker."* He abducted the love interest of Bruce Wayne, Vicki Vale, played by Kim Basinger. Then the Joker waited for Batman to rescue her. He breaks through a sky light, swoops down and picks her up then uses multiple gadgets to climb back up and escape. As the Joker watches he says, *"Where does he get all those wonderful toys?"*

More than once when Cliff and I were discussing some tense issues in the Church he always put a spin on the conflict that left me wondering, *"Where does he get all this poise and equanimity?"*

Those were moments I realized he had a piece of God, a thread of the gospel of life I didn't have, but wanted. St. Paul reminded the Romans, and by extension reminds us today, that if you want them we have to undergo spiritual dyings in order to allow Christ to free us and raise us up above the old threads that keep us small and stale. I wish it were quick and painless. But, spiritual birthings in adulthood is awkward and uneasy which is why God puts people like Cliff in our life to awaken us to the desire to endure shedding our old self in order to taste the fruit of becoming a new self in Christ.

John 14 1-6

Finally, when I asked Cliff why he chose John's gospel he said, *"You know that line about in my father's house there are many mansions. Well, the first thing I will ask is which one is mine?"*

Yes, I laughed too. But after the laughter I knew that the spiritual thread woven by the divine weaver in Cliff is that he never appeared to have a troubled heart. So, faith in the father of Jesus was a dominate piece of his spiritual DNA.

The gospel reading is the prelude to the long discourse at the Last Supper after the washing of the feet. Jesus has just announced his departure. The disciples are

troubled. They spiral into hurt. They gave their hearts to worry, anxiety, denial, darkness. Those emotions were the prelude to troubled hearts. Jesus knew that and like Isaiah, tries to get them to focus on him as the source of consolation.

Jesus tries to free them with the words, *I am going to prepare a place for you*. His final reassurance is that his departure is only that they may be together forever. Teaching Thomas that he is the way, the truth and the life in that eternal dwelling does not mean that Jesus is some kind of interior GPS system. It means that their relationship with him in this life is the link that will connect them with his Father in the next life.

Three threads in these readings were woven into Cliff's Christian life:

First, an openness to the consolation of God,

Second, giving witness to the pains of the dying and rising of spiritual growth with poise and grace, and,

Third, nurturing an intimacy with Jesus and his Father, through prayer, sacraments and celebrating God in the "house" of the Church,

This is how Cliff took those threads and lived his life as a gospel of life. We honor his memory by desiring the pieces of God he had that we desire. Bring those desires to the table of this Eucharist, so the true gospel of life can nurture us in making them our own.

Amen.