

Homily – Charlie Williams Funeral Mass

Friday September 19, 2014 – 10:00 am

St. Polycarp's Church – Smyrna, DE

In her book, *Mary Shadow of Grace*, author Megan McKenna shares a story that is a good fit for this funeral Mass for Charlie Williams. On page 34 she writes:

A few years ago, traveling in Wales, I did a parish mission in a dark, grim, and poor small village, made nearly all of slate mined in the hills above the town. At night we would sit in a cozy house by a fire, drinking a bit of whiskey and watching the sky darkening and the shadows coming on. It was fascinating. The house was pitched high in the hills above the town. As I looked in the valley below first there would be one light. Then minutes would pass and another light, then another. A trail of light wound its way below us, around and in and out. I watched, wondering what it was and how it was created. My host smiled and said, "Ah, you've noticed. We are still poor and a bit backward here. That is the lamplighter, walking through town, lighting the gas lamps." Then he said, "There is a saying by the philosopher John Ruskin that I always recall when I catch sight of the lamps being lit down below in the village: "You always know you have been in the presence of a Christian by the trail of light they leave behind."

By virtue of their profession, educators are called and expected to leave a trail of light behind for others to follow, especially their students. Those of you from the Smyrna School District who shared that call with Charlie Williams the English teacher know what I mean. Those of you whose life values were influenced by his skills as an administrator know that the Superintendent Charlie Williams grew into a wisdom figure who left a trail of light behind. He did that very capably long before the PC, the I-Pad, Google and the Apple Smart Phone. It was not the marvels of technology that made the difference in him, but because his life was deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions. He was a man with an interior life. It is what made him the same on the inside as on the outside. It is a grace in some people who are well anchored in believing in a higher power. The trail of light they leave behind comes easy for them.

As he grew in his mother's womb from fetus to infant, and after birth from child to adolescent, from soldier to college graduate, from husband to father and grandfather, from teacher and cheerleader at Eagles & Blue Hens Football games to Superintendent of the district, Charlie always walked the trail of light his parents left behind. Today, we gather to honor the trail of light he has left behind.

It's not something you buy at Wal-Marts or Barnes & Noble. A trail of light is not a product. It is in our DNA; something mysterious that colors our ethical principles and how we chose to live life. Charlie Williams lived as a man of integrity and equanimity. They are two pieces of his DNA he leaves behind for us. They were nurtured in him by his parents and the traditions and sacraments of the Catholic faith. Whenever he accessed those traditions and practiced those sacraments his human DNA morphed into his spiritual DNA. The scripture readings tell us how God does that.

Wisdom 3:1-9

The reading from “The Wisdom of Solomon” contrasts the fate of the just and the fate of the wicked. The just seemed to have died, but they are really alive with God. Their sufferings in this life appear to be punishments, but their sufferings are not punishments at all. Rather they are a form of discipline; a testing of fidelity in which God recognizes those worthy of him. Those who endure their suffering faithfully are full of hope for a blessed immortality and at the Judgment they are the ones who shall enjoy the Kingdom of God. The Wisdom teacher is suggesting a different trail to walk for those who suffer. He implies that what is more important than your sufferings is what you do with them that will earn you hope for the future. In today’s computer imagery he would suggest, click on God in your afflictions and will find a divine caregiver who will find you worthy of abiding with him forever. Solomon left this trail of wisdom behind for Charlie to walk.

Romans 6:3-9

St. Paul speaks about how our DNA turns spiritual on the day of our baptism. It represents, symbolically, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The infant or an 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 oneself, to our selfish attitudes, to what makes us small, to our hatreds, our prejudices, our apathies, our unforgiveness. Baptism begins the process of letting go of those dark inner flaws so that divine light can pierce us making it easier for God to get out of us and into others. It is a process that never ends. Some of us, like me, let go kicking and screaming. Others, like Charlie Williams, 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. It was a trap because the Joker then waited for Batman to rescue her. He breaks through a sky light, swoops down and picks her up then, using multiple gadgets, winches & wedges, he swings back up and they escape. As the Joker watches in delight, he says, “*Where does he get all those wonderful toys?*”

More than once when Charlie and I were discussing some tense Church issue making news he always put a spin on the subject that left me wondering, “*Where does he get all this poise and equanimity?*”

Those were moments I realized he had a piece of God I didn’t have, but wanted. St. Paul reminds the Romans, and by extension reminds us today, that if you want those virtues you have to undergo spiritual dyings in order to allow Christ to free us and raise us up above what keeps us small and stale.

I wish the process were quick and painless. But, spiritual birthings in adulthood are awkward and uneasy for people set in their ways, which is why God puts people like Charlie in our life. They awaken us to a new desire to endure shedding our old self in order to taste the fruit of becoming a new self in Christ. Whenever that happens we change paths and follow someone who leaves a different trail to walk. The symbols of sprinkling holy water on Charlie's casket, draping it with a pall and the paschal candle shining bright at his head are reminders that, 91 years ago, on the day of his baptism Charlie would walk the trail left behind by Jesus. The fruit of that life is that he is walking no more but resting in glory.

John 14: 1-6

When Ruth requested this gospel passage at lunch on Monday I chuckled to myself. I had a flashback to another funeral on Feb. 14, 2013 at St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Hockessin. The deceased was a long-time friend, Cliff. When I met with him to plan his funeral several weeks before he died I asked him why he chose this passage from St. 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 when I get there is, which one is mine?"*

Yes, I laughed too. But after the laughter I opened a window on my soul and God showed me a man who never appeared to have a troubled heart. Cliff's faith in the father of Jesus was an integral piece of his spiritual DNA. He and Charlie had this in common.

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 click on the wrong program and trouble entered their hearts. They did not delete it quick enough.

They spiraled into hurt, giving their hearts to worry, denial, darkness. Those emotional viruses were the preludes to spiritually troubled hearts. Jesus knew that and like the Wisdom teacher of the Old Testament, tries to get them to re-focus on him as the source of consolation. It was a new spiritual program he was downloading into them as a Wisdom teacher of the New Testament.

The words, *I am going to prepare a place for you*, is a new program for their souls. His final reassurance is that his departure is only so that they may one day be together forever. His method for 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, rather, that their relationship with him in this life is the link that will connect them with his Father in the next life.

As a devout Catholic, Charlie Williams nurtured that kind of relationship with Jesus at the Eucharistic table. He tasted of the eternal banquet every time he received Christ in the bread of life on this side of eternity.

Now that he has passed into eternity, this mystery of faith means that Ruth and the family will dine with Charlie whenever they meet at the table of the Lord. For in the Eucharist, this wonderful Catholic thing that gives us our special religious identity, life before death and life after death meet in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the altar of the cross made present on this and every altar. It is transcendent love that nurtures in our life before death the assurance of life after death.

This is what we celebrate today; faith traditions left behind that Charlie followed; his well lived life before death – has led him on a path to a new life in glory. Join me in thanking God for the trail of light he leaves behind; a trail full of memories, stories and how the wisdom of one man can make a difference. These amazing graces have brought us to this place where we renew faith in the power of a love that long before our time, the ancient prophet Talmud, simply but strikingly pointed out to the world:

There are but ten strong things in the world –

*Rock, but iron breaks it.
Iron, but fire melts it.
Fire, but water quenches it.
Water, but the clouds bear it.
The clouds, but the wind scatters them.
The wind, but the body withstands it.
The body, but fright crushes it.
Fright, but wine banishes it.
Wine, but sleep works it off.
Death is the strongest of all,
But love saves us from death.*

Amen.