

Homily
Mom's Funeral Mass
Friday June 5, 2008
Holy Cross Church – Dover, DE

Lamentations 3:17-26 – Romans 6:3-9 – St. Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

Permit me please to offer a few words of greeting to friends in the assembly who are Hispanic.

Buenos dias queridos amigos: Aquiero darles un saludo especial porque ustedes son muy especiales para mi y mi familia. Les damos la bienvenida a la santa misa en el funeral de nuestra madre y nos honran con su presencia. Ella fue una mujer pequena per don un Corazon grande donde pudo hacer espacio para todos ustedes. Por favor, canten y oran libremente con nosotros hoy mientras celebramos vida en la eternidad. Gracias.

Once upon a time a wise Eastern teacher was conducting a town hall meeting. Most of the questions people asked were about life after death. The teacher did not answer any of those questions. On the way back to the monastery a student spoke up and said, "Master, how come you never answered anyone's question about life after death?"

The teacher said, "Have you ever wondered about those people who don't know what to do with this life but they want any one that will last forever?" The student persisted by saying, "But, is there life after death or not?" The master smiled and said, "Is there life before death? That is the question."

People who are schooled and formed in the Judeo-Christian life believe that the answer to both of those questions is revealed in the Hebrew God Adonai and the Christian God, Jesus Christ. So we turn to the scriptures not only for answers to questions about life after death, but for insights into how to live more fully the mystery of life before death.

Let me break open the living Word just proclaimed to see what pieces of good news God has for us, the ones living the mystery of life before death gathered here to celebrate the mystery of Julia's life after death.

The reading from the Book of Lamentations speaks to the tensions of despair and hope among the chosen people, emotions that so often collide in us and color the way we engage the mystery of life before death. The laments were composed by the prophet Jeremiah after the death of King Josiah in 605. This event opened the door for the defeat of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonian Empire in 597. Jerusalem has been destroyed, but the temple not yet pillaged. The nine verses from chapter three are a gut wrenching account of Jeremiah's bitter experience of witnessing the

defeat. Hunger, poverty, mental anguish is his litany of pain. But his despair does not demonize him from blocking out all hope.

Like a Brahms symphony gently segueing from a heavy movement to one lighter and upbeat, the second part of the lament expresses his hope. Like deleting a virus from a computer Jeremiah clicks on a new inner program. A window opens on his soul and he sees that God's wrath is not final. Once he owns that insight and is freed from the inner despair that a false voice triggered in him he sees his suffering and that of the fallen city as a small piece of the larger picture of God's graciousness. Once Jeremiah's heart is changed and reset, the words in the second half of the lament change. Mercy, faithfulness and hope give him confidence that Yahweh's eternal covenant with Israel will be upheld. From that point on the prophet takes his heart back from despair and gives it to hope which becomes for him the saving help of the Lord. At that moment Jeremiah gained new insight into the mystery of life before death. His conversion gives meaning to the wisdom saying: *"we do not see things the way they are; we see things the way we are."*

The reading from the letter to the Romans is St. Paul's great teaching about the new Christian life bringing liberation from death and sin. Through baptism, which identifies humanity with Christ's death and resurrection we are transformed. This new life as reshaping our humanity is the core of Pauline spirituality. He speaks from his own experience. Saul of Tarsus, a rigid Pharisee and terrorist of Christians had his life reshaped by divine intervention. His baptism was the end of the chapters in his life when an inflated ego and abusive behavior turned him into a lesser man. His conversion and anointing was his resurrection in which divine bounteous grace empowered him to be alive to a larger God full of love and goodness. His words about the "old man" of sin and the "new man" who lives in union with Christ are taken from his converted heart and not from a textbook. For St. Paul being freed from the sphere of sin and death and being brought into the sphere of "Glory" is part of the good news Mom embraced as a baptized Christian.

Finally, St. Luke's account of the Emmaus journey is an awakening story about Christ manifesting himself in his resurrected body on Easter Sunday. Like Jeremiah in the Lamentations reading the two disciples have given their hearts to false voices that left them in despair and disillusionment. Because they are so shut down by these dark emotions they do not recognize him. In the words of another wisdom saying: *"what you focus on determines what you miss."* That all changes as the risen Christ de-blocks their hearts with new stories and opens their eyes in the breaking of the bread. At that point a story about a sad walk to Emmaus becomes a story of a joyful marathon back to Jerusalem. In that journey they learned

something new about life before death: the risen Christ can free sad hearts and change them into burning hearts.

These faith stories say as much about Mom, as they do about the biblical characters that are central to the mystery about life before death and life after death.

She had the capacity to lament as Jeremiah did. She could lament the death of a good friend as much as she could lament forgetting to salt lima beans.

Her spiritual life enabled her to understand St. Paul's image of "old man/new man" in her own way. She knew it as the difference between discerning real people from fake people.

This is captured in a story about Elijah.

One day he was walking along with a rabbi, delving into the Law and speaking of the wonders of God. On the road they passed a dead dog that had been hit by a wagon. The dog had been lying there for days with birds picking at it and vultures chewing on it. The rabbi immediately held his nose as he caught a whiff of the rotting stench. They passed it and continued with their discussion, barely missing a beat.

About a mile down the road they passed a respectable couple out walking, dressed in their finery, proud and haughty, taking up the better part of the road. And this time it was Elijah who held his nose!

Like the disciples in the Emmaus story Mom's faith walk swung between despair and hope. It is a piece of spiritual DNA we all share in common. It is the spirituality of imperfection that shadows every imperfect person. Like the two disciples in the story what she did with it defined her spirit. She brought it to the table of the Lord so that seeing him in the breaking of the bread Christ could reset her heart so that it would burn with healing and new hope.

Food was a symbol that links all you to Mom. Whether it was a meal in her home, in a restaurant, at the Clayton Fire House or a fundraiser dinner at church our lives are tied to her through turkey and stuffing, chicken and dumplings, green beans and Cole slaw. She prepared meals for three as easily as she did for 300. She did it with a selfless heart, seasoned with enduring friendships and peppered with the kind of chatter that was typical of "The Golden Girls."

This piece of her legacy reminds me of a story. When the Jesuits were evangelizing the Chinese in the 16th century they used the image of food to teach them the difference between heaven and hell.

Hell was described as a great banquet hall. In the center was a long table with luscious food, tempting sweets and delicious desserts. They had to eat it with four foot chopsticks. So there was chaos in Hell as everyone was angry and fighting with each other trying to taste the food.

Heaven was described as the same banquet hall. In the center was the same table with the same luscious food, sweets and desserts. They too had to eat it with four foot chopsticks. But in heaven there was happiness and delight and feasting at the table for everyone was using their chopsticks to feed each other.

Mom was always other-centered when it came to food. She never pretended to be Julia Child, just Julia Mast who shared the tangible food of meat, fish, poultry, potatoes, veggies, her signature rice pudding and shortbread with others as much as she freely shared the intangible food of love, conversation and friendship.

Today my family and I, like Jeremiah, St. Paul and the disciples in the Emmaus story, swinging between grief and joy, have our inner lives nourished and our hearts reset toward hope celebrating Mom's life before death and her life after death with all of you - 400 of her closets friends.

We want you to bring to this table of the Lord your laments over her passing, bring the pieces of your unconverted lives caused by addictions to false voices, and bring your despairs and woes like the disciples in the Emmaus story. In the breaking of the bread in this funeral liturgy our hearts are freed again to burn with new desires to witness to others 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 it
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.*

Let that good news be the spiritual food that nurtures your life before death as it has earned Mom a place at the banquet table in eternity where she will be nurtured in her new life after death.

Amen.