

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR “A”

During this past week the events surrounding the death and burial of Pope John Paul II were brought into our homes through the magic of television and the power of the internet. All across the globe people stopped to watch the unfolding of this historic moment in time. What was it that drew viewers – believer and non-believer, Catholic and non-catholic to watch this spectacle? No doubt there were many elements of attraction. For me at least, I believe that there were two fascinating pulls, if you will, that lead people to this incredible event. The first pull was greatness. Already the argument is being made that history will call John Paul, “The Great.” There is, indeed something so alluring to greatness. The marvel of greatness is something to behold, not to mention something we aspire to.

The second pull towards this event is another g-word – namely, grief. The dictionary defines grief as “a deep and poignant distress caused by bereavement.” Grief is typically something we would just as soon deny because grief always involves suffering. And yet – grief is a fact of life. To live is to grieve. As human beings we not only grieve death but we also grieve loss, endings, change, farewells, defeat and age. Grief always demands time and space – and we all deal with grief differently.

On a personal note, it’s only been during the last few months that I can honestly say that I have moved beyond the grief of losing my parents in such a short time. I know my life will never be the same without my parents – but with the help of God, family and friends, I have worked through my grief. But it does indeed take time.

This time element of grief is evident during the Easter Season with the disciples. While there is rejoicing in the greatness of the resurrection and the good news that He is alive, there still is grief. Last weekend you might recall we encountered the grief of Thomas who withdrew from the group and later in that grief doubted Jesus.

Grief renders one so vulnerable as manifested in today’s Gospel as we encounter the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were walking together conversing about what had happened. Their friend, the one in whom they had placed their trust, was now gone – dying a brutal and seemingly senseless death. They just could not understand this sad turn of events. Lo and behold a stranger approaches, but however, according to Luke, “..Their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.” In other words, in their grief, they couldn’t see. The heartache of their loss blinded them. They probably were feeling sorry for themselves – and maybe in the vulnerability of grief surrendered to selfishness. That is, the only thing they could see was themselves and their own hurts and loss.

How many times in our grief we walk down that same road. In my own life after my parents died – for a good long while I was oblivious to what was around me. I could see, but only my self – my loss, my needs etc. Suffice to say, grief can be more blinding than the sun.

As the disciples continue walking with this stranger they engage in conversation with him and pour their hearts out to Him. And then something remarkable happens. This stranger takes them beyond the moment to the big picture and says, “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?”

These weary disciples are so drawn to this stranger, that as the sun sets they say, “Stay with us.” Well this stranger not only stays with them but He gathers with them around the table, takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. And in that breaking of the bread something even more remarkable happens – their eyes are opened and they recognize that this stranger is the Lord.

Right now in our humanness each of us is grieving someone or something. If it isn't a precious someone lost through death, separation, divorce or job change, then it is a special reality like youth, good health affirmation or the loss of a comfortable situation. Whatever it is, we need to acknowledge the vulnerability of it. That is to say, like Thomas, we can become hurt and withdraw or we can become blinded like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Grief escapes no one – and if we are not grieving, then we are not living in the really real. There's an Italian proverb that states, "He who would have no trouble in this world must not be born in it."

In any event when we do grieve, we need to keep walking and talk about it with a friend and or a stranger be it a priest, counselor or therapist. Above all, we need to regularly approach the Mass and the Eucharist so that we can have the same experience as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – that is, our eyes opening and not only recognizing the Lord – but gaining a deeper understanding of life – with its mysterious complexities.

You know there is something fascinating about greatness. It is a reality we all wish to exude. But if we search history I think we will discover that true greatness only comes as a result of grief. In a real sense we grieve who we were in search of who we can become.

One of the great oxymorons of our time is the phrase "Good grief!" How can grief ever be good? Grief can be good when we own it and address it and ultimately have that eye opening experience that the disciples had.

As we receive Jesus in the breaking of the bread, may our eyes be opened and may we see the wisdom of suffering and the glory of resurrection.