

Homily for Monday, Aug. 10, 2020

2Cor. 9:6-10

John 12:24-26

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This Gospel has a title: The Parable of the Mystery of Life and Death. An ancient understanding and translation of the word “mystery” is Gift. So, we might say: the Parable of the Gift of Life and Death.

In the context of all the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus is speaking of his own death and resurrection. Plumbing the depths of this gift takes a lifetime of reflection.

Implied, as well, in this parable is the reality of all the natural world, in the example of the seed. A single grain brings it down to earth. The lesson goes further into human life. We easily apply the metaphor to ourselves as Paul’s letter to the Corinthians makes clear. The Gift of Life itself – our very existence – is undeniably a gift.

When we consider Death (and these days, it is right before us and among us every day to the far-reaching ends of the world) it might be more challenging at times to consider it as gift. The mystery of life itself is inseparably tied to the mystery of death. Death is but a moment of life. This is a fundamental reality in our world.

As with all parables in the Gospels, there is something deeper-another layer of meaning – another dimension to reach for – that death is a stage of growth and transformation toward divine life and because of Jesus, the resurrection and eternal life are linked to our bodies in a radical way. Here is where we reap comfort and consolation in the face of difficulties and sorrow.

Our interweaving of sensorial awareness of the visible world around us with the sense of the transcendent “unseen” world of the spirit impels us to explore the wonder of life but also the inevitability of death and what comes of it.

In doing that let’s consider the second part of the parable – the part about “producing much fruit” – and from Paul, “reaps bountifully” and the repeated word “abundance”.

We will look at some examples. We do not have sadness in burying seeds underground because we trust that they will change and grow and bear fruit. Farmers and gardeners plant with anticipation and hope for the death of the seed to be transformative.

Another reality of this mystery or gift is in our human history. We consider that many people have been gift-givers that bore fruit years and years after their deaths. Life goes on because of their response to life in gift giving that is transformative.

An example of this comes from my childhood when the rampant epidemic was polio. A second-grade classmate lay in an iron lung in the living room of her home on the corner of our block. We would go to visit her – only her head showing in this huge tunnel

that filled her living room. Some of us children could only stare. One day a black wreath appeared on their front door. She was laid out in her First Communion dress – as beautiful and peaceful as we could ever want to be.

Mothers in our neighborhood and many neighborhoods in our country went from door to door to collect for the March of Dimes, an organization to promote and finance research for a vaccine to end this dreaded plague.

Then when I was in fifth grade, our class was marched down to the principal's office where a nurse stood with a tray of small paper cups each holding a pink sugar cube. One by one, we put out our tongues to receive this life-saving vaccine against polio.

The Salk vaccine is an example of the gift of life and death – transformative for new life.

Examples from our faith history are that of the saints: today we celebrate St. Lawrence – a prototype of martyrs. If we are to learn from the saints how to die, we have to first look at their prior attitude towards life. The gift of their life and death is in the “YES” that saints responded to God. A “yes” that was repeated over and over in the many times that entails a kind of death to our own desires and plans and egos.

The famous and lovely story attributed to St. Lawrence is that when a Roman official intent on material gain demanded that Lawrence hand over the treasury of his church, Lawrence gathered the neediest people of the congregation, the poor, the abandoned, the widowed, the disabled and sick. He presented them to the official, saying “Here are the treasures of the church.” This bold action cost him his life.

Lawrence had confidence that life had meaning and a goal that was life everlasting. His life is part of the transformation of the church that lives on in witness to Life. Love is stronger than death.

We can draw more examples from our current life/death pandemic:

The PBS News Hour each Friday spends several minutes featuring the lives of some who have died from Covid-19. Reports of their ordinary lives, yet sharing goodness, service, talents and love to make a better world, reveal in a moving way the many saints who are around us every day. Those who understand, like St. Lawrence, that Life is a gift that we give away to bring more life.

That giving of Life is present here every day. The dying and rising of Christ are encoded here in each person who lives and works and volunteers here. We see living and dying and new life.

Yet, on a somber note, we must admit that we do not have answers for all the death that is rampant in our world today. Death by disease, war, violence, neglect, selfish power and on and on. We rail against choices of those who choose to cut off the gift of life in others, themselves and creation.

We stubbornly hold on to the promise of Jesus that “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” We believe that promised Life is here and now, as well as in eternity. God’s dream for creation will prevail.

So, these days we revert easily to the word “mystery” in that we don’t have the fullest understanding of this parable. We still must uncover many layers. Probably only in the passage of time will we see and know the gift.

For now, in solidarity, in community, in faith, we pledge to trust that one seed grows into many grains; one prayer can move mountains; one compassionate action multiplies others; one sacrifice, one action for justice, one courageous act, one selfless death is transformative.