

Odds are if you look around your home, you probably have some things that were given to you from people who have crossed over into eternal life. And while on the surface it might just look like a Christmas ornament or an afghan or a scarf, to you it means a whole lot more because of who made it for you, and who that person is.

If you were to stop by my home, you'd find many such things that were created by a lady the world knew as Pat Kammen, but who I called grandma.

When I was about 8 or 9, as she liked to create things out of yarn, she took it upon herself to create for me a town, which she decided should be called "Paulsville." And so every month or two, what would arrive would be something new. There was a TV Repair Store, as my grandfather Mike was a TV repairman in his spare time. There was a newspaper office, a golf course, a farm, a couple of churches, a diner, a hardware store and a number of other little buildings too. And this is on top of the scarves and afghans and Christmas ornaments that are also found in my home and the homes of my parents, uncles and cousins.

Growing up, I was fortunate in that I had the opportunity to visit my grandparents often, as both sets of grandparents lived nearby in north Minneapolis. And if there was one word that I'd use to describe my grandma Pat, it would be the word "joy." She is a person who never had a bad word to say about anyone, and was always happy to see you. Like many grandmothers, she'd want to insist on making you something to eat; in my case as a rather happy 5 year old it consisted of home made cinnamon toast and cereal loaded with sugar that was probably 5 times what you'd get in Frosted Flakes. We'd spend time together playing games. And there might be a pack of baseball cards waiting for me on the hi-fi stereo as well she'd get from the drug store where she worked at for many years. Eventually I'd start cutting the lawn or doing yard work by the time I was in high school, and I'd cherish being able to visit her.

But from those visits, I received a lot more than a good meal. I received a lesson in how to live. My grandpa Mike slipped and fractured his hip, and grandma was always at his side and attentive to his needs giving him love and care until he entered eternal life in the summer of 87. I'd see how she treated people at the drug store; always with a warm smile and greeting. I'd see how she would pray often, watching religious programming on TV when she was unable to go to church and taking her faith very seriously. And I'd learn also the value of hard work as I saw how hard she worked, and recall one time when I was a bit older and spent the night at her home, we went to work in the backyard cleaning things up. I'd see how she'd look people in the eye and value their presence and conversation and family get togethers; how she'd bake the best chocolate chip cookies known to man because others enjoyed them so much; and how much she valued family. I honestly can't ever recall her recalling being angry or upset once, because she just lived for other people.

And I think where this perhaps hit me most deeply was in the summer of 2003, when my grandmother lost her battle to pancreatic cancer. She was in the hospital for something else when tests revealed she had cancer and there was nothing that could be done; she

could either continue dialysis and expect to live several more months, or end dialysis and expect to live another couple of weeks. I wasn't there when she was told the news, and in fact my dad was the one who told her. I'll never forget though what he told me though about their conversation. He said that she seemed incredibly at peace; as if she knew she was going to go home to be with God and reunited with Mike. And in the days that followed, I had the chance to visit her in the hospital, and it was as if I was five or six years old again. There was the same smile; the same joyful expression. I think her biggest frustration was that she was not able to be in her kitchen to have something to give her guests to eat. The conversations were never about her; she'd direct them to be about you, and time would pass and you'd get lost in talking to her. Even one of the things she'd say in her last days was to look at you, and encourage you to live life to it's fullest and have a wonderful life. It was a testament to a person filled with joy and peace.

Like everyone who walks the earth, I have no idea how much longer I will be here. But I know the time will come when I'll have to confront death; with people I care about; certainly as a priest journeying with people time and time again through their loss, and then ultimately one day my own death. It's not something that we much like to think about as humans; hence the emphasis on enjoying the moment. But death should not be something that fills us with gloom; rather it is something that we simply have to have a Christian attitude towards and think about how God intends it to be as a falling asleep and crossing over where life is changed not ended, rather than what it has come to be which is for some a point of finality or something pushed out of sight, out of mind.

In our first reading today from Wisdom, we are told that God does not make death, and that it came through envy of the devil. The way to think about this is that while all things die and have a natural order, it was only after sin entered the picture and humans became alienated from God that death became something for humans that was horrible or terrifying. Death as described in wisdom isn't just the physical decay of the body; it's the psychological, the spiritual and physical phenomenon that sinners experience.

Jesus though changes everything. Jesus is God's reminder to us that we are loved forever; He overcomes death, and through Jesus, we share in His resurrection. This is why Mary, who had this complete focus on God and trust, we are told simply falls asleep peacefully and is assumed into heaven. She had confidence in God's love; and that love enveloped her, just as it enveloped my grandmother, and just as it envelops us all. How then can we as Christians look at death, rather than pretend that it's not there?

First and foremost, we must remember we are loved by God, and that love overcomes death. Jesus in the Gospel heals Jarius' daughter, healing a woman afflicted with a hemorrhage along the way. Jesus is told that she has died, and the mourners, who were actually people who were hired to mourn publicly to let others know a family was grieving, ridicule Jesus. It's somewhat understandable as she has died, and if someone said "no she is just asleep" even to us today we'd find that odd. But they also can't see the reality of the situation - that God is going to transform death into life. He loves this girl, and speaks to her in Aramaic telling her to arise. The same thing happens to us

when we die. We do not fear falling asleep at night; but we naturally fear death, because of the unknown. That's normal, but it's so important to remember that the love that God has given us is something that is always there. We still experience death, but it is not a passing away, it is a crossing over where we encounter God's love once again. This is why even when we die struggling with some things to overcome or something we had a hard time changing, God's love purges that from us (hence "purgatory" not as a place of punishment but a final cleansing and purification). When we die, there is only love. I think this is what my grandmother knew, as the peace I saw on her face and heard in her voice was remarkable and gave me courage on how I hope to die too: with a complete trust in God's love taking me from this world to the next.

Second, listen to the words of Paul in the second reading: "Jesus, though he was rich, for your sake he became poor." Jesus has emptied himself out for us, but this is how we are called to love one another too. Paul says to excel in faith and love; that the abundance of the Corinthian community should supply the needs of others. He is stressing to them the importance of helping other Christians and of generosity. When I meet with families for planning a funeral, so many share stories with me similar to the one of my grandmother Pat. They speak of sacrifice, of the love between a husband and wife, of the many things that they did for them. Because my grandmother had her eyes fixed on God and heaven, she lived in this world as someone who brought God's love into it. And in the process she showed me how to live. God's love is always there for us, but it requires a response beyond simply "I believe." In a million actions, I've seen my grandma and so many other great people in my life live that out. Jesus doesn't disappear or take much down time for Himself; rather he constantly helps others, and we too must do the same for one another.

Third, remember that it is OK to grieve; it's OK to be afraid; but through it all, remember death will never have the last word - God's love will. I still grieve the people I've lost in my life; and even as I was preparing my homily I was getting misty-eyed thinking back all those years ago how much I'd like one more conversation, one more meal, one more visit to a small house on James Avenue in North Minneapolis. That's not going to happen, and it's painful. And it's also painful, even scary when we see people we love begin to slip a bit, or suffer. Even Jesus was fearful in the Garden not knowing fully the Father's plan or why things were unfolding as they were. But through the darkness of that moment for Him, love had the last word - and that love of God will soothe our pains, our fears, because He is there to comfort us.

Lastly, never forget that when we look at death as a Christian, while we grieve and mourn, we remember too that when we die, we are simply asleep to the eyes of the world, but forever in God's love, for life is eternal. When we die, we are outside of the confines of time and space; hence we still have the remains of people at a cemetery, but the person is moved from this world to the next and has a resurrected body that is never destroyed. I look at the many things that fill my home and my parent's home; I look at the pictures from the photo album, and I long for those moments, but I know I will meet up again with my grandma, because she is still so very much alive, not just in the memories, but in eternity with her Lord and Savior. And I know she is praying for me,

inspiring me, encouraging me just as she did when I could hear her voice, because she intercedes for me and like God, is with me always in the life.

There is no getting around the harsh reality of death. But God does not intend it to be something frightening or painful - God gives us a moment here on earth to make it a better place in our own way, which we do when we surrender to His love and follow Him. As we prepare to gaze upon our Lord in the Eucharist, may we never forget that our Lord loved us to the end, and that love will never fail or leave us. And as we take that love into our hearts, may we never forget that with each cookie we bake, each smile we give, each conversation we have with a loved one, and each simple act of charity, we transform the world one action at a time from a place of darkness to light, filling it with the light that will shine forever, that of the power of our loving God that, just like our lives, never ends.