

We Remember the Dead. But What About When Memories Aren't so Good?

To help in my homily preparation, I try to find a relevant story to tie into the readings. I'll often do this at funerals as well.

Among the stories that are easy to be found are stories of people sharing testaments to their loved ones.

However, I recall one funeral that I had once where the person came in to talk about their lost loved one, and it was difficult. There was a very strained relationship between this person and their parent, and it became clear that while they wanted to honor their life, they were still struggling with the reality that this person was not the ideal parent.

Going through some of my resources, I came across a story from an anonymous woman who had to go through some of these same struggles too as her father entered the twilight of his life. She identifies herself in her story only as "sis."

In her case, she had been abused as a child. To cope, she learned that she could not keep silent about it, but that she needed to talk about it. But doing that was of course, very difficult. When her mom found out, her response was "My God, he's ruined your life." Other responses were pity, shock, anger and attempts to relate to the pain she carried. There were others who were "pull up your bootstraps" people, or those who encouraged her to just move on. Others might say "forget about it, it happened a long time ago." Or "the trials in our lives make us stronger." However, through all of her therapy sessions and support groups, one thing that was never told to her was to try to forgive.

In thinking about that concept, she thought it impossible. For, how could she forgive this man for hurting her like no one else ever could, and for elevating his evilness to even higher levels with her little sister? And so over the years, her anger and hate snowballed.

At the time she was writing the story, she said 5 years prior, she had gotten the news that her dad was diagnosed with lung cancer. There were no treatment options. He was dying and was alone. At the time, she felt a twinge of satisfaction at the thought that his ultimate punishment would be intense suffering and isolation. How appropriate his death seemed.

Her intent from the start was to remain detached. When he was moved to a nursing home, she still had not decided whether or not to visit him there when she pulled into his apartment complex to gather some of his things with the siblings.

They sorted through his personal effects and they found something very strange. The man that they thought had turned his back on them had pictures of all his children in their younger days on his walls. Photos of his fondest childhood memories were tucked away in treasure boxes. She writes that the man they thought did not believe in God had religious artifacts displayed throughout the home. And she saw that the man she thought did not have a heart had saved mementos of special life events and the people

he cherished. It was only during these moments Sis writes that she could look past the “monster” and see the “daddy” she had once adored. When they finished cleaning the apartment, she followed her brothers and youngest sister to the nursing home.

Her father could not disguise his surprise at seeing her. His drawn and tired face lit up and a smile broke as he said “Hi Sis.”

Being true to herself, Sis kept her distance from her dad. At one point he said to them, “I know I wasn’t a very good father.” Sis could not disagree with that, so she said nothing to dispute it or to make him feel better. On the drive home, it suddenly hit her that those words were the closest thing that he could come to an apology, something she never expected to hear. As insufficient as they seemed when he said them, those words had opened, just a tiny bit, the door that Sis thought she had closed forever.

Sis and her sister, who was abused as well, talked. They had talked in the past about the traumas they shared, to them he was only the monster, not a dad. For the first time Sis shared with her the good memories she had of a man who got down on the floor with his sons to assemble the Christmas train set, who took his kids fishing on weekends, who taught them how to build things, who made a beautiful rocking swan for her when she was a toddler and who doted over each child when they were born. Sis and her sister talked, and cried.

When they got to the hospital, the nurses said it seemed that their father was waiting for something or someone. Sis and her sister looked at each other with a mutual knowledge of what he was waiting for. As they stood on either side, each holding a hand, they saw how vulnerable and small and scared their father was, just as they had been as children. It was in that moment she says they had to choose whether to hurt him as he had hurt them or to prove themselves to be decent and worthwhile human beings. Neither could tell them what he needed to hear, for that would be a lie, but they both told him to go in peace, and they meant it. He took his last breath and slipped away.

Sis says that in freeing him, they began to free themselves, and that in opening the door to forgiveness, they had finally and honestly begun to heal.

Such is the power of mercy and love. But we are confronted always with the reality of evil, and it is so often something we try to ignore. God’s love though shines on the good and the bad. So how do we strive to love like that?

In this month of November as we contemplate our mortality and remember the dead, and as we do so its important to try to remember both the good and the bad, and to pray for those who have died. How do we do this and try to find peace with those who have wronged us though?

I think as a starting point, we acknowledge reality. Some people suffer serious abuse such as Sis did in the story. We’ve all seen what secrets and not talking about things have done with respect to the Church abuse scandals. But the top place abuse happens is in the family. Even if something doesn’t rise to being technically criminal, a person may

have been hurt deeply by emotional abuse, alcoholism, or a person who was never around or didn't love them as they should. Rather than try to mask these things or cover them up, we need to talk about them, sometimes with a professional counselor, but certainly with someone who can listen and journey with us as we try to heal. Remember too just talking about it once doesn't make it go away; it could have been many years and the pain is still fresh, so continue to talk about it and remembering healing is a process.

Second, I think we can then pray that God will help us to take the next steps. Even before we pray for the other person, a starting point is asking God to help us through our pain and to take the initial steps towards trying to forgive the person and pray for them. Jesus said "forgive them, they know not what they do" from the cross when no one was asking for forgiveness. I don't know about you but I sure would have a hard time forgiving someone who was killing me and not even asking for forgiveness.

Once we do that, I think it can help to try to see the humanity in other people. God sees to the heart; and most of us have a heart that is divided. But sometimes we just see the bad things because of what we have gone through. Maybe the person who hurt us was hurt by others earlier in their life too, and learned behavior and habits that were evil; such is the power of sin. But it could be that there were good qualities too in this person.

Seeing the good, we can then begin to ask God to help that good to increase. As I shared last week at Mass, when we die, if we die still struggling with temptations and things in us that haven't changed yet, God helps us to take the final steps. This is why we pray for the dead. God's love can help that person change permanently into a saint.

Lastly, we strive to forgive. But remember, this isn't instantaneous. We can't forget the past, but if we forgive we can set ourselves free too of the hate and anger. It's not easy to do, but looking at a crucifix and seeing how Jesus does it, He can help us take the steps to get there.

As the saying goes one does not speak ill of the dead, but that's not too healthy of a mentality. We needn't do it on the day of the funeral, but we need to do it for healing and remember that our relationships with people never end, and that God's love is so powerful it can help us overcome anything. People do evil things. God came into the world and our response was to kill Him. But love always wins out, so let that love set you and those who have gone before you free by letting it have the last word on removing forever, rather than covering up, the sins that have impacted us.

God bless,

Fr Paul