

Feast of Christ the King

Cycle C, 11.20.16

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:12-20

Luke 23:35-43

THE LAST WORDS YOU'LL EVER HEAR

She sat at the end of one of the many dining room tables. She was short and squat, with the little remains of a Dominican habit: a simple white dress and a small black veil covering most of her white, wispy hair. Dining halls in seminaries and convents -- called *refectories* -- were once filled to overflowing. Now only a quarter of this Dominican refectory had to be lit; there were so few residents at the motherhouse, mostly the elderly and retired sisters and a couple of novices. As I left the hall after sharing lunch with one of their community leaders, I was introduced to the little old nun who caught my eye as I sipped my soup. I had hoped to say hello and hurry on my way, but sister had hooked a listening ear and insisted on sharing a story, which to me, was a tale of passion and resurrection. The sister was deaf, couldn't hear a thing since she was thirty years old. A reaction to medication after a simple surgery over fifty years ago robbed her of her hearing. The surgery was successful, but she woke up the next day and could not hear.



At first, she thought she was dreaming, but the reality quickly set in. She learned to read lips perfectly and spoke with only a slight impediment, but she lived in a world without sound. She lived by the memory of words that once surrounded her... and she cherished those words with all her heart.

The last things I recall hearing, Father, she said, were the music to the show Oklahoma, a Notre

Dame game and the voices of my parents when I called them following my surgery to tell them that I was alright. Those sounds still echo in her ears -- forever etched in her mind and heart. What those sounds must mean to her each time she recalls them. After I met that sensitive and delightful nun, I found myself wondering what would be the last words I would want to hear. What sounds would I desire to carry with me forever, if I could choose them? Would it be the laughter of children, reminding me that life always renews itself and contains the seeds of the future? Would it be the music of a community singing at Sunday Mass -- full-throated and filled with conviction? Would it be the words of a well-prepared lecture by a teacher whose insight I trusted and whose critical judgment I admired? What final sounds would you want to carry with you into eternity?

The gospel of Luke provides us with the last words which the "good thief" crucified with Jesus heard as he left this world: *Today you will be with me in Paradise*. What a sense of comfort and assurance must have washed over that man -- the assurance that he was forgiven, that there was a place for him in God's kingdom, that the doors to mercy and love were not closed to him. Just as Jesus, from the cross, spoke those words of comfort to the dying man, there will come times in our lives when we too will be at the bedside of someone who is dying. Many people dread that moment and are hard-pressed to know what to say at a time like that.

I once listened to an inspiring interview with Dr. Ira Byock. He's a leading figure in palliative care and hospice in the U.S. He said we lose sight of "the remarkable value" of the time of life we call dying if we forget that it is always a personal and human event, and not just a medical one. Many of us these days catch glimpses of this as we move toward death with loved ones in hospice, or with friends or even strangers through the CaringBridge website. These are often transformative experiences, as dense with healing and celebration as with grief and loss.

What do you say to a loved one who is dying? Dr. Byock recommends eleven simple words. *Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I*

love you. Those four things, he said, are used in his clinical practice quite frequently. People often tell him: “*I don't know what to say to people.*” Dr. Byock responds: “*If you're really stuck at any time, those four things are a good way to start. You can use them verbatim, but make them your own.*” I can't imagine a more simple yet profound way to speak to the dying.

Please forgive me. Husbands and wives, children and parents, friends and neighbors, priest and parishioners – there are none of us who have not offended others, directly or indirectly. As our prayer in the Confiteor admits: we have sinned “in what we have done and in what we have failed to do.” Too often we brush off the imprudent words we say, the catty remark we make, the compliment we hold back, the harshness we inflict on others. We let our offences against others simmer, and hope the person we've offended will eventually forget. Those small infractions against one another can build up over time. To seek the forgiveness of a dying person allows old wounds to be healed.

THINGS THAT
matter
 MOST
 must never BE
 AT *the* mercy
 OF THINGS
that matter
 LEAST

I forgive you. Who among us are not in need of the healing that comes from being forgiven. Being forgiven with no strings attached. Not, I'll forgive you but you better never do that again. Not nursing the wound or harboring a grudge. The act of simply letting go of the hurt and extending forgiveness. It doesn't have to be for anything specific; many times we don't even recognize how we have been hurt by another

person's words or attitudes. Offering a dying person our forgiveness will lighten the heart and allow him or her to be at peace in their final days or hours.

Thank you. The simplest words we teach a child to say can be the most profound words we offer to one another. I was grateful to God a few years ago when I was visiting my family in Ohio and my brother-in-law John was dying in the hospital. Before I left, I went to see him for one last time. Although he was very quiet and non-responsive that day, I made sure I was the last one to leave his room that evening. I sat next to his bedside and thanked him for being a wonderful brother-in-law, for generously opening his home to me for thirty years every time I came to visit, for his humorous emails, for loving my sister. I prayed that he heard and understood what I was saying. I'm so glad I did; he died the next day.

I love you. It's a phrase that gets tossed around so much today, some think it has lost its deeper meaning. The connections of love between people are the things that matter most. If you were to ask somebody's who's being wheeled into heart or liver transplant surgery or someone who's facing chemotherapy for the third or fourth time, "What matters most?" The answers will always include the names of people they love. What's filling our iPhone calendars starts to drop away really fast when someone we love is seriously ill. The words *I love you* cross our lips more easily. My uncle Don who was also my godfather was diagnosed with acute leukemia many years ago. He was a retired police sergeant and had always been a very independent man. The leukemia weakened him to the point where he was dependent on others for everything -- for food, a drink of water, a few steps with a walker, even toilet functions. He was a loving and kind man, but, like many of us men, reluctant to demonstrate that affection. One evening as my aunts were leaving the hospital, they kissed their brother and told him they loved him. I overheard him say to them, “I love you.” I was surprised and

deeply moved. As I left that night, my uncle said in a faltering voice: “Johnny, you learn to use the “L” word a lot while you’re in here.” I kissed him and said good night and told him that I loved him too. I could see that some change had taken place in him. It’s true that sickness had laid him low and afflicted him in a cruel way. But somehow, in spite of the horrible nature of the cancer, I experienced a tenderness in him that only the grace of God and the love of family could have effected.



Today on this Feast of Christ the King, we claim Jesus as the Lord and center of our lives. His comforting words to the “good thief” is his message to each of us. One day we will share with him the joys of Paradise. We have a foreshadowing of that promise every time we share in the Eucharist. And we have the power to bring the joys of Paradise to others. We don’t have to wait till someone is dying to extend the gifts of Jesus to them. We can know now what Paradise will be like whenever we extend ourselves to others out of love, forgiving and seeking forgiveness, and always offering thanks to God and to one another.

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