

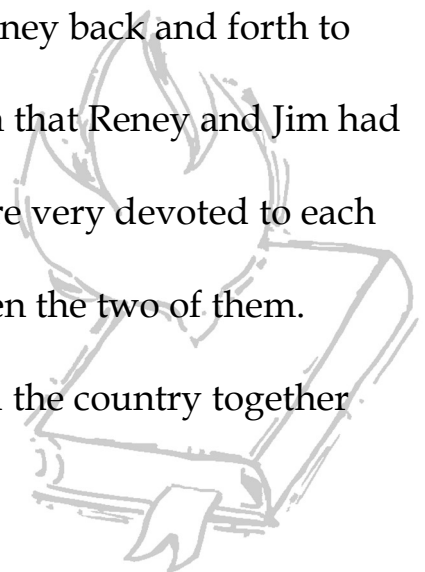
Homily
3rd Sunday OT - A
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 21-22, 2023

Is 8: 23 - 9:3
Ps 27: 1, 4, 13-14
1 Cor 1: 10-13, 17
Mt 4: 12-23

Last week, I received a phone call from a woman named Irene (or Reney). Reney has attended Masses at both parishes I serve in the area and quietly makes her presence felt to me in the way she prays and lives her life. I have been honored to spend time at her home and she has shown me her gift of making stained glass windows, a gift to which I was introduced during my high school seminary days.

Reney called me last week because she was somewhat despondent. As I came to learn, Reney had been undergoing radiation and chemotherapy treatments after being diagnosed with cancer some time back. Reney's husband Jim had been driving Reney back and forth to the hospital for these treatments; I came to learn that Reney and Jim had been married for some thirty-five years and were very devoted to each other; there was a great love that existed between the two of them.

Reney told me that Jim and she had travelled the country together



extensively, especially when visiting the western states. When Reney was diagnosed with cancer, her husband was devoted to taking care of her, driving her back and forth to the hospital to get her treatments. As I have encountered too many times in my quarter century as a priest, instead of the person in home care dying first, the caretaker was taken first instead; about a year ago this time, Reney's husband had died.

Reney could not have a funeral last year for many reasons, so she was not able to grieve in church with her family during this time of loss. Earlier this week, Reney called me and asked me to pray with her over the phone so I could offer some kind of prayer of commendation on behalf of her husband, Jim. I offered that prayer but, in addition, I said maybe it would be a good idea if we celebrated a mass over at St. Anne's Church to remember Jim in a more liturgical setting. Reney told me that she did not know if family or friends would attend this Friday night service; she felt a bit lost in this time of grief.

In reflecting over Reney's loss, I started to reflect on the idea of loss, especially in light of our scripture readings this weekend. In the current

course I teach at the University of St. Francis entitled, “The Theology of Death & Dying,” I try to explain to the students how we often take life for granted without realizing exactly what kind of gift that has been afforded in the world, namely the gift of life itself.

As I have preached on more than one occasion, I have referenced the words of Morrie Schwarz in Mitch Albom’s book Tuesdays with Morrie, as this sociology professor imparted this type of wisdom to a writer who had taken his own life for granted until the concept of death was sitting right in front of him. Morrie would tell Mitch, “Once you learn how to die, it is only then that you learn how to live.” In a more spiritual context, once a Christian learns that there is more to life than death and a “death defying” Christian understands an everlasting peace that exists on the other side of life, instead of being so obsessed with the things of this world to which we are attached in this world (our cars, our houses, our fortunes, our popularity, our whatever it is), once we get rid of all of those attachments, then we understand our true purpose for life itself.

I teach the students that Morrie Schwartz attached himself to a type

of “Buddhist” mentality and Buddhism’s “Four Noble Truths,” namely that...

1. Life involves suffering.
2. Suffering is the result of our attachments in life.
3. Get rid of the attachments and you get rid of the sufferings.
4. You get rid of your attachments through an eight-fold path of right living, right thinking, etc.

1. La vida implica sufrimiento.
2. El sufrimiento es el resultado de nuestros apegos en la vida.
3. Elimina los apegos y elimina todos los sufrimientos.
4. Eliminas tus apegos a través de un camino óctuple de vida correcta, pensamiento correcto, etc.

For a Buddhist, one has to progress through a series of lives that are represented by the image of an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a monk who has removed all attachments from life. As Christians, we understand that we get one shot at life so we should make it a good one – once we get rid of the attachments, the things that really do not matter, then we understand our true purpose in life – to love God and to love neighbor.

Yet, our world consumes us with these attachments that we get

drawn in to a life that ultimately lets us down. If you turn on the television or open a newspaper, our culture *wants* you to be consumed with whatever they feed you, that sports or music or death or suffering (and the means of entertainment that the media often uses to corrupt an individual from embracing their true purpose in life). In our modern culture (as has been in the past), for some reason culture wishes to draw you into the world of “doom and gloom”; if it bleeds, it leads.

In reality and certainly in the life of faith, most deaths in the world are more in the realm of the mundane reality; over 60% of our deaths in the world are either from heart disease or cancer. Our human culture does not wish to focus on the mundane things of life or even what is good in life because the mundane or the good does not attract our human desires and certainly do not produce the ratings and attention that our human culture often seek.

In the world of God and faith, those who understand that our lives do not begin and end toward which culture often drives us find a greater peace in moving on from this world into a better one with the

divine – faith brings a peace and normalcy to our lives that human society cannot. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross would argue that what the individual really wants in life is to be heard and to be loved – we get so consumed with life and death issues that we bypass the human person, the story and listening to the other and what the other has to say.

In the world of death and dying, the good Christian realizes that a suffering person wants to tell their story of life and wants to be heard and embraced. Kübler-Ross would tell us that we get so obsessed with the attachments of the world that we really do not think about the last stage of her theorized grieving process that often evades a suffering person. Kübler-Ross theorizes that doctors and nurses spend so much time trying to cure the patient, that they do not spend enough time *listening* to the patient, allowing a person to talk, to share their lives, to share their stories, to validate their faith or to share their love.

For Kübler-Ross, after the stages of grief that she defines as shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and even acceptance of death, the last stage essential to the person of faith is *hope*. The problem is, in our

society, we get so obsessed by the sufferings of the world and all of the horrible tragedies that we evade our true purpose and what awaits us on the other side of life well-lived..

Our scripture readings reference this theory, as least in my way of reflecting this week. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, the protagonist wishes to restore the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali, both tribes being lost after the Assyrian invasion of 722 BC. Isaiah prophesizes that with faith, these tribes can be found, knowing full well that after the Assyrian invasion, those who lived in these regions were understood as “The Lost Tribes of Israel.” We know from our gospels that Jesus was raised around the territory of Zebulon and Naphtali, raised in the Gentile territory that he references in today’s gospel.

We also learn in our faith that Jesus came down on earth in Matthew’s gospel to serve as the “new” King David and establish a “new” type of Jerusalem that will not necessarily restore the glory of the city in modern day Israel but reveals the one that awaits us on the other side of life.

The problem for us is that most of us are conditioned to believe that the land of Israel will be restored to its former glory while God tried to condition us to think beyond the kingdom of earth, leading us to the one in heaven. When we stop trying to deny death and focus on defying it by realizing there is more to life than death itself, it is then we encounter hope for a better future that is not constrained by the way human culture wishes us to live.

We learn in the world of faith that Jesus is not of this world. As stated in Chapter 18 of John's gospel if this were of Jesus' world, then the world would try to save him from the destruction to which our culture wishes to deliver us. Instead, Jesus tries to impress on us the hope of a better tomorrow, a hope that none of us are alone and that each one of us is loved, if we allow God to take us under the divine's metaphorical wing.

It was this hope that I was trying to impress on Reney at our Friday night Mass, when around fifty members of our parish community, as well as her family and friends, came to St. Anne's Church to support

and love a woman who wanted to tell the story of her thirty-five year love affair with her husband Jim. We learned on Friday night that if we understand what our true purpose is in life, if we allow those who grieve to tell us their story, then we can appreciate what life means to them and makes our lives richer in the process.

Our readings implore us to make a difference in life by spending time with the people that you love, to make sure they know that you care from the heart. If we spend time listening to the story of others and see how the Spirit lives in each other's hearts, then we understand what Christ is saying to us in today's gospel: "Repent and believe in the gospel." Forget the things of the world and how our culture wishes to condition us; focus on what is truly important – our love of God and each other.

Let us learn how to listen, love and learn together by embracing this gospel message, by seeing the Spirit of God in each other, by realizing that in the world of faith there is always hope for a better tomorrow and by bringing hope to hopeless situations. Let us share this story of faith,

love and certainly hope with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.