

Daily Reflection - May 23, 2020
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond, VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

I planned my funeral about a year ago. No, I was not sick last year. And no, I did not have prophetic knowledge about the arrival of the Corona Virus.

Rather, I planned my funeral because as a celibate person, I have no spouse or children to make those decisions for me when I die. So the diocese asks us to have everything in place well in advance.

Even though I am spending my entire priestly life here in Virginia, it may surprise you to learn that I will actually be buried in the cemetery of New Hanover Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania. That's where Renningers have been buried since the 1750's. It's where my grandparents are buried, and my mother is buried there. Some aunts and uncles are buried there. I'll be buried there too.

New Hanover Church was built in 1768. Just nine years later, after George Washington and his Army were defeated at the Battle of Brandywine, the American troops headed north. And when they came to the fields around New Hanover Church, they stopped.

They turned the church into a temporary hospital. The wounded were placed on the pews.

Many of the soldiers of Washington's Army died in that church. And they were quickly buried in the same cemetery where I will be buried.

I remember wandering through that cemetery on a sunny afternoon with my family. My brother and I were trying to count how many headstones were in German. Then we came upon a row of small stones, carved in English. All those headstones said the same thing, "A soldier of the Revolution. Name unknown."

My dad told us the story of Washington's Army and their encampment. I was a little boy, trying to imagine what it was like to be one of General Washington's soldiers, what it was like to fight for independence. Little boys think that being a soldier is fun.

We all stood there, quietly staring at the stones. Then my mother said to my brother and I, "Say thank you."

With some confusion, I asked, “What?”

Mom repeated, “Say thank you. We don’t know the names of these men, but we do know that without them, we would not be free. We would not have the kind of life we have. Someday, you’ll understand what they’ve done for you.”

My brother and I felt kind of foolish, staring at some headstones and saying ‘thank you’ to the thin air.

But that experience clearly made an impact on me, because whenever I find myself standing at a military grave, I recall my mother’s words: “Say thank you.”

And as I’ve gotten older, I’ve begun to see that my parents were right. Without the sacrifice of members of the military, without the generosity of men and women who give of themselves for the service of others, I – we – would not have the kind of life we have.

I’m not sure I’ll ever understand all that they’ve done for us. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to show enough gratitude for the opportunities they handed on to us.

But that little boy in the cemetery has also stood before headstones at Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Normandy, Bunker Hill, Yorktown, and Monte Casino, and I’ve said to the air, “Thank you.”

Memorial Day weekend is the perfect weekend for boys and girls, men and women, to remember, and to say thank you. We have to be taught, so that we can be reminded of what has been done for us.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says it very clearly: we *need* to be reminded. That’s the word he uses. This entire Gospel passage takes place at the Last Supper. Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples, and Judas has gone out into the gloomy night to betray the Lord. Soon, Jesus will be arrested. By the next afternoon, he’ll be dead.

So this is his last chance to speak to his friends one last time. He has taught them so much. He has done so much for them. They’ve seen him interact with so many people.

He came to proclaim the presence of a different kind of ‘kingdom.’ This is a kingdom *not* defined by borders or decrees. This is a kingdom *not* spread by muskets or swords. This is a kingdom into which everyone becomes a naturalized citizen.

No one is *born* a Christian. Christianity is handed on to us, as a *gift*. The Christian faith does not pop into our heads naturally while we’re walking in the woods. Someone has to tell us the story.

Someone has to pass the faith on to us. Someone has to give us the gift that they themselves received as a gift.

And that gift is the freedom we experience when we realize that the story of Jesus has become my story, that the love of Jesus can become my love, that the dying of Jesus gives meaning to my dying, that the rising of Jesus is the only way that I will rise.

This is the Good News which Jesus proclaimed and taught and enacted while he walked this earth. Now, in the darkness of that Holy Thursday night, he tried to summarize the Gospel once last time for his friends.

But maybe Jesus knew human nature better than the rest of us. Maybe he knew how easy it is for us to forget the most important things. Maybe he knew how often we take for granted the most amazing gifts.

So he says to his friends – and that includes *us* – “the Father will send you the Spirit” (that is, God’s life, God’s breath). And that Spirit will be like our companion and our best guide. And God’s Spirit will teach us *everything* we need to know, and – here’s that word – the Spirit will *REMIND* us of everything Jesus did for us.

God doesn’t expect us to know everything or remember everything. God knows that we need to be reminded by the *Holy* Spirit, because our *weary* spirits make us prone to forgetfulness.

Due to the current quarantine, we have not been able to gather as a community to celebrate Baptisms during Mass. In order to accommodate some specific circumstances, we have celebrated Baptisms in private, with careful attention to hygiene.

But whether a Baptism happens in the middle of Mass or in a private chapel, we know that in the waters of the font, children receive the gift of the Spirit. These children were not BORN Christians. They have to *become* Christians. They don’t yet know the story of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Someone has to give them that gift, and tell them that story.

Prior to baptism, children do not know what sin is – but some day they will, and then someone will need to hand on to them the faith which assures them that sin is forgiven.

Little children cannot spell the word “love,” but some day they will learn, and more importantly, someone needs to help them experience the love of God that comes to us in Christ. Someone will need to show them how to love their neighbor, and even love their enemy!

Newborn children do not know the stories of how Jesus multiplied the loaves, or healed the sick,

or forgave sinners. Someone needs to give them that gift, and hand on that faith.

Someone has to teach the Good News of Jesus to all newborn children... just as someone had to teach the Good News to us. Someone loved you enough to hand on the gift of faith that they themselves had received as a gift.

And that human chain of gift-giving and kingdom-building and justice-doing goes all the way back to that man who sat with his friends at the Last Supper, and promised that God's Spirit would *remind* us.

Every day is a good day to remember what Jesus did for you, for us, for everyone. Every day is a good day to remember the kind of life, the kind of eternal life, he made possible for us. Every day is a good day to stand before his cross and to say "thank you."

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