

Saturday, February 13, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

Memorial Service for Gus Kriletich

Gone From My Sight
Henry Van Dyke

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side,
spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts
for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength.
I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck
of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then, someone at my side says, "There, she is gone."
Gone where?
Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast,
hull and spar as she was when she left my side.
And, she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.
Her diminished size is in me – not in her.

And, just at the moment when someone says, "There, she is gone,"
there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices
ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"

And that is dying . . .

Today we gather to celebrate Gus' life, but perhaps also we might celebrate his arriving on the other side where he is greeting by his parents, Kuzma and Mandalina, his older brothers Matthew and John, and Clara, his beloved wife of more than forty years. Gus lived a full life and was blessed not just to be a father to six children, and a grandfather to ten, but also journeyed this earth life long enough to know his half-dozen great-grandchildren.

Last year, for almost nine months I worked as a hospice chaplain, which was a very sobering and humbling journey. Week after week I was invited into the sacred time of people's last months as their earthly pilgrimage came to a close. It is a vulnerable time when bodies become weak, minds often fade, days are counted as blessings, and comfort becomes a primary goal. Those months of hospice work led me into a profound contemplation of my own mortality, my goals and priorities along this relatively short pilgrimage, and I think I left my parents a bit disconcerted when I spoke about my own death wishes and asked if they've documented their wishes or have ever giving thought to planning their memorial service. Death isn't a part of the journey we like to think about. We avoid the topic. We delay writing our will. We don't like the idea of picking our funeral songs and readings. There's often an awkwardness around what to say when visiting someone in the hospital who is dying.

Three buddies died in a car and went to heaven for an orientation. They are asked, "When you were in your casket, and friends and family are mourning over you, what would you have liked them to say about you?"

The first guy said, "I would have liked to hear them say, 'I was a great doctor of my time, and a great family man.'"

The second guy said, "I would have liked to hear them say, 'I was a wonderful husband and school teacher who made a huge difference in many children's lives.'"

The last guy said, "I would have liked to hear them say, 'Look, he's moving!'"

That story is pretty reflective of a 21st century approach to death . . . pretty much an attitude of avoidance, or cheating death. But our faith sees death as part of the journey of our existence, in fact, a needed part of the journey. Ideas like Resurrection, eternal life, and even heaven make no sense without reality and sanctification of the passage of death. Saint Paul writes in his first Letter to the Corinthians:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet....When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

Our faith bears witness to the power of life over death—witnessed in the Resurrection of Christ and offered to all. There is a brightness that pierces through the veil of the darkest shadows, the deepest valley of despair. There is a movement and force of love more powerful than the deepest hatred. Even the natural world attests to the fact that even out of destruction, the death of a tree, a forest fire, a flood—there is a resilience to life. The power of life is so strong it cannot be suppressed. Not even by death—for as Saint Paul elucidates, even death has lost its sting. Death is no less real. Death is no less foreign and strange to us. But in the words of Chief Seattle, “There is no death. Only a change in worlds.” There is a beautiful parable that shared with me that comes to mind:

Once, in a little pond, in the muddy water under the lily pads, there lived a little water beetle in a community of water beetles. They lived a simple and comfortable life in the pond with few disturbances and interruptions.

Once in a while, sadness would come to the community when one of their fellow beetles would climb the stem of a lily pad and would never be seen again. They knew when this happened; their friend was dead, gone forever.

Then, one day, one little water beetle felt an irresistible urge to climb up that

stem. However, he was determined that he would not leave forever. He would come back and tell his friends what he had found at the top.

When he reached the top and climbed out of the water onto the surface of the lily pad, he was so tired, and the sun felt so warm, that he decided he must take a nap. As he slept, his body changed and when he woke up, he had turned into a beautiful blue-tailed dragonfly with broad wings and a slender body designed for flying.

So, fly he did! And, as he soared he saw the beauty of a whole new world and a far superior way of life to what he had never known existed.

Then he remembered his beetle friends and how they were thinking by now that he was dead. He wanted to go back to tell them, and explain to them that he was now more alive than he had ever been before. His life had been fulfilled rather than ended.

But, his new body would not go down into the water. He could not get back to tell his friends the good news. Then he understood that their time would come, when they, too, would know what he now knew. So, he raised his wings and flew off into his joyous new life!

May we—who have heard this Good News—release Gus who has ventured beyond the surface, as we await our own day for that journey beyond.

© The Rev. Justin R. Cannon