

We can learn a lot from a person who is dying.

I've learned this lesson over and over again in the quarter century plus I have been a Paulist. Some of the most profound experiences I've had as a seminarian and as a priest have come while sitting with and listening to those who know they will soon die. Some of these times have been memorable because they have been filled with tenderness, truth and love. Some of the times have remained with me because of the tragic denial and despair that have surfaced as the dying – or those around them – desperately lie to themselves about what is happening.

We hear both of these behaviors in tonight's gospel. John's gospel always presents Jesus as being in charge, aware of what is going on around him and ready to deal with it head on. And so the evangelist tells us this evening that, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father." With that knowledge Jesus begins a process of teaching his followers one last time what it means to be his disciples. He gives them an example of loving, humble service. And then he gently prods them to articulate what they have learned. "Do you realize what I have done for you?"

And, as we know, their answer is a rather sheepish, "Ummmm....no?" Their acknowledged leader, Peter, clearly fails to understand. First, he is in denial about what Jesus is doing and why he is doing it. "You will never wash my feet!" Then, snapping out of his denial he shows he just doesn't grasp Jesus' lesson. Give Peter his due. He's not a person with any hidden agendas. His initial denial of reality and the misunderstanding that supersedes it are both very public and upfront. He just doesn't get it. His needs get in the way of understanding what is happening...and what he is to take from it.

But such is human nature and our society today. It's hard for us to look death squarely in the eye. We much prefer to look away, to deny it's going to happen, to live in the joys of the past or to look past the hurdle that lies before us. But look it squarely in the eye is what we are asked to do in these three holiest days of our faith. We cannot hope to understand what an empty tomb means until we have embraced the grief of a tomb newly filled.

Many years ago an elderly woman asked me to be with her as she presided over one last “family meeting” before she died. With her children gathered around her bed she began by saying, “I’m going to die in a few days. You all need to understand that. You don’t have to be happy about it. But it’s true. And before I go I have a few things to say to all of you and to each of you. If you don’t think you can listen you best go. But I would like you all to stay.” And stay they did...not without much shuffling of feet and sniffing of noses. But stay they did.

And then she taught them by example. She forgave. She healed. She loved. And ten days later, as they celebrated their mother’s funeral Mass, they understood what she had done for them...and what they had been asked to do.

We are invited to stay this night with our teacher: to listen, to watch & to pray.

We are invited to listen to the story of the Passover & the story of the Last Supper and hear in them our story – the story of a people who gather for a holy meal...nourished so that we might do God’s will.

We are invited to watch – to see in Jesus’ example of humble, loving service how our lives are to be and how we are to act now.

We are invited to pray – that we may understand what has been done for us...and that we may do as he did.

We can learn a lot from a person who is dying.

© Fr. Tom Jones, C.S.P.