

[Proverbs 1:20-33](#)

[Psalm 19](#)

or [Wisdom 7:26-8:1](#)

[James 3:1-12](#)

[Mark 8:27-38](#)

So, I'm back from my three week stay-cation and I've learned a few things. First, by Tuesday of the first week, I found myself wanting to be here. I did resist the temptation, mostly, but it was wonderful to be reminded that I live a life in which I love what I do every day, which is being a part of this family. Second, on the one night I did spend camping by myself in the Santa Fe National Forest, I got the chance to look up into a sky filled with more stars than we ever get to see around here, and let the Lord remind me how significant and yet small our human failings are in the grand scheme of things. Yes, we truly are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under the Lord's table, and yet, His property is always to have mercy - no matter how bad a mess we make, individually or collectively. We do seem to have trouble accepting God's mercy and even more, emulating that mercy, but that's for another sermon.

On Tuesday of last week the diocese learned of the death of Father Everett Lees. Everett became the Vicar of Christ Church in Tulsa in 2011 after two years as a curate at St. Patricks and it was a marvelous fit. Christ Church was a struggling parish when Everett first went there and has

become one of the most vibrant parish families in the Oklahoma Diocese. Once that Church Family and Everett Got together, Christ Church became Everett's whole life, to everyone's blessing.

About three weeks ago we learned that Everett had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. On Tuesday of last week, at the age of 48, his body gave up the fight and Everett entered the nearer Presence of God.

There are, for sure, many unwelcomed struggles ahead for those left behind. But before the great mystery of death itself, I am reminded of the passage from the Book of Wisdom that is often read at Episcopal Funerals:

... the souls of the righteous are in the hand of
God,
and no torment will ever touch them.
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have
died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace.
For though in the sight of others they were
punished,
their hope is full of immortality.
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive

great good,
because God tested them and found them worthy
of himself.

Those who trust in him will understand truth,
and the faithful will abide with him in love,
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,
and he watches over his elect.

The struggles ahead when someone close to us dies are very real and difficult. It's one of those moments in life - like our birth into this world - when we're given no choice about picking up that cross. But I have also, over and over in my own life, experienced the truth of the promise Paul gives us in the 8th Chapter of Romans:

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose."

I do not wish to suggest for a minute that when we suffer loss -- and we all do, every one of us -- that we will not or should not grieve, or that we should try to blunt the very real pain of mournings with platitudes like "God has a plan," or "God needed another angel." No. Real love is always accompanied by real pain, real tears, and heartfelt anguish. Grief is a precious and necessary part of love and it should never be diminished. Indeed, the essence of

the Gospel message is that God suffers all the same anguish *for us*, and gives us a sign of the Creator's own anguish for us on the cross. The pain of loss is sacred and we should always treat it as sacred.

But I will suggest that even in grief we can live in the faith that, in the bigger picture, **God's got this** even when **this** is painful, even when **this** is traumatic, even when **this** is unjust and unfair.

Every life knows pain. Every life knows loss. Every life ends in death. Love is what makes the difference. Love allows us to know meaning and purpose and, most importantly, shared thanksgiving, even in the midst of suffering. And the joyous times, the times when the spirit fills our lives and our worship, well, that's something else!

A life without love, unmourned loss, and meaningless death, these are commonplace in the world we still live in. But that is not the Christian way: Even when we grieve we are thankful for the gifts we have been given, even when we mourn we praise the Source of all that was, is and ever will be, and even at the grave we make our song, "Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." I have always been bothered by, I am sure, well-intentioned evangelism that wants to make "getting into heaven" a reason to become a Christian and join a church. That's just another instance of seeking to save your own life. You can only enter the kingdom of heaven by loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbor as yourself; there is no other way.

Love is central to the Christian life. We even affirm that God's very nature and essence is love. But understand, love is not a feeling. Love is a state of consciousness. We see it in the teachings and example of Jesus. It is not some woo-woo altered state that anesthetizes and places us above the pains and sorrows of humanity. To the contrary, love as a state of consciousness is marked by selflessness, care for God's creatures, and a passion for the kind of justice that leads to reconciliation and peace. If anything, love plunges us into the pains and sorrows of humanity, relying upon God's grace to work good and bring peace into the world and into human hearts through us.

That's where we find our peace.

Everett's death this week put an edge on Jesus' call to "take up your cross and follow me," as I prepared this week's sermon. Everett truly gave his life for the sake of sharing the good news, all of it. He lived it. He breathed it. He died in it. It wasn't because he wore a collar on his neck; it was because he carried Jesus in his heart.

Now Everett and I had very different views on many topics, theological and political. But the selfless love with which he gave himself to his family, his church, and his many many friends and acquaintances -- that love comes from listening to and following Jesus. That is where we, as Christians and as Episcopalians are always united, not in our political views, not even in our theology, but in our shared worship, and our desire to be and to support one another in being disciples of Christ, to put our selfish pride aside, take up our crosses and follow him.