

Paula Gmelch Homily | Mar. 9, 2007  
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St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Rev. 21; John 11

I chose this gospel for Paula's memorial service because Mary and Martha tell the Lord what many of us have been thinking over this past week, even if we have not verbalized it: "Lord, if you had been there, Paula would not have died."

At this tragic moment, we cling stubbornly to the belief that God is Emanuel — God with us — and yet Paula did die. In some strange way, it is consoling to realize that in the face of death, God does what we do "...and Jesus wept." God wept at the death of Lazarus as surely as God weeps with us at the death of Paula. For persons of faith, this is not a mere anthropomorphism invoked to make us feel good. Faith tells us that Jesus is God-made-flesh-and-dwelling-amongst-us. In the face of Jesus, and only in the face of Jesus, do we see the face of God. That face is tear-stained but flushed with anticipation at welcoming Paula into her heavenly home.

God stood powerless in the face of the death of his only son. God knows first hand our pain. If God is powerless to prevent death, even tragic deaths, God is able to transform death into life — not as Jesus did in the Gospel by returning Lazarus to the same old life he lived before the grave — but by transforming death into the new and more abundant life that Jesus promises us in the Gospel, a life that is beyond our imagining, such that we can only speak of it in images and metaphors. If God is not able to prevent death, even tragic deaths, God is able to ensure the ultimate victory of life over death and love over hatred. We offer no glib or easy explanations for Paula's tragic death, nor do we surrender our belief in the God who has the last word, and that word is life, not death.

In a real sense, it is not death that brings us together this afternoon, but life — the life of Paula Gmelch, who touched all of us in differing degrees and a variety of ways. Paula's inherent grace and infectious goodness radiated from her — at a basketball game, a lecture or a University reception — but never more brilliantly than when she was beside the love of her life, Walt. Walt and Paula were the living, breathing, dancing definition of a "married couple." Paula has died but her love for Walt and for Ben and Tom will never die; it shifts into a new mode in anticipation of their being reunited again and forever. Our human relationships are stronger than death, and Paula remains with us in our minds and hearts as mother, wife, daughter, sister, companion and friend because she now lives the fullness of God's own life that will one day be ours. Paula is ever more radiant and alive; we are the ones in pain, not Paula. And we must be comfort and consolation for each other.

We know that the sad state of our world, still haunted by the specters of war, hunger, famine and plague, is not God's work. But God is with us in our efforts to make this world more closely resemble God's world, described in the passage from Revelations that Dan McPherson read. God hopes for a world without pain and suffering, without sorrow and loss, without war and violence. This is the world that God would have us create, and it is a far cry

from our world but a captivating description of the world that awaits us on the other side of death — a world entirely of God’s making, a world of grace unstained by our human sinfulness.

Let us celebrate Paula’s life and honor her memory by doing as she did — by making ourselves responsive to the needs of others, be they students or colleagues or members of the global community far beyond our neighborhoods. Let us exert every effort to make this world more closely resemble God’s world of grace where the hungry are fed, the lonely are comforted and the stranger is welcomed. Let us do what we can to ensure that the old order passes away sooner than later so that the new order can replace it.

Paula walked out of her home at 34 Chabot last Thursday afternoon and headed up the hill to interview USF students for the summer leadership seminar in Australia. She was going up to the School of Ed and she walked right into the open arms of our loving God. And God took her to himself and wiped every tear from her eyes and his. We may comfort one another with the faith that Paula’s heart is full; her life is overflowing; she is at home in that place where there is no death or mourning, no wailing or pain, where the old order has completely passed away.

Those of us who are still heading up the hill may aptly pray the words of the old hymn:

“Lead, kindly Light, amidst the tumult and the gloom,

Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home —

Lead Thou me on.”