

Befriending the Thief

(A homily on Death ©JD Stillwater, 2016)

My mother's father was born in 1894. Grandpa Stege was the oldest of seven children, so when his parents could no longer afford a coachman, care of the family's horses fell to him at the age of six, in the year 1900. Horses were transportation then, not recreation. Even living in New York City, he wouldn't see his first automobile until he was in his 20's.

In **my** 20's, in May of 1992, when grandpa was 98 years old, I sat on his bed in a small rural hospital in Eastern Ohio. My mom had taken a break to play with my kids in the grassy courtyard. Grandpa had been asleep for several days, and we figured it wouldn't be long. I held his hand, a hand that just a few days before had been hoeing in the garden. Straightening up, he had cursed his arthritis yet again and issued his familiar tag-line "Johnny, don't ever get old!" He never did quite catch on to the whole "JD" thing.

I sat on the side of the bed just looking at this quiet, peaceful old man with his Dagwood haircut, and I don't know if I said it aloud or just in my head, but I said "You can go whenever you're ready grandpa." As though in response, the pauses between his breaths got longer and longer, until the pauses were far longer than the breaths. Within about ten minutes, that last one-more-breath never came. It was... beautiful.

At his Memorial Service, I never cried. I cry in Disney movies, graduations, sermons, you name it. But not at Grandpa's service. I thought there must be something wrong with me, 'cause I was the only one NOT weeping. It took me years to realize that maybe those last peaceful moments with him had been a bigger gift than I realized, offering a chance at a different relationship with death.

Today I am especially remembering Aaron W— and Amy W—. A year ago I was spending most of my free time planning and organizing the memorial service for Aaron, my dear friend and colleague. Aaron was in the not-to-be envied position of being able to plan his exact date of departure. It's one of the few perks that comes with life on a ventilator after descending alive and well into the hell that is ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. There are times, not hypothetical at all, when death bestows a multitude of blessings, on both the dying and those who remain.

Aaron's memorial service was held on March 28th at the Clover Lane campus, as had been long planned, and was made beautiful by the concerted efforts of many friends. It was a fair and fitting send-off for a man who had endured the unendurable, and I'm proud of my part in it. But I have one major regret: that I was not able to be present here at the Market Street campus to say goodbye to Amy W— that same afternoon.

Amy's death was sudden, traumatic, and with her passing, Death did NOT "bestow a multitude of blessings." It was devastating, to many in this church community. Death is a thief! It steals away those we love with no right of return, and no redress of grievances. Who wants to be friends with a thief? Especially one so capricious and disloyal? Who rips our hearts out time after time after time?

I do.

The Hebrew book of Genesis says: From dust were ye made, and dust ye shall be. By now you know that we are literally made of stardust. Most of the atoms that make up the stuff in this room, including our bodies, were created in the blast furnace of an exploding supernova star about seven billion years ago. Before the explosion, only light elements like hydrogen and helium. After the explosion, a dead star, and the surrounding space filled with precious heavy dust that gravity slowly collected into ... all this. On the day that star died, was Death a thief or a midwife?

Carl Sagan once said "The secrets of evolution are Time, and Death." There was a day in the late Cretaceous period, a truly dark day, probably a Monday, when Death arrived here as a large asteroid. That was a sucky day to be a dinosaur. It wasn't exactly a good day for anyone on the planet, but for our mammalian ancestors, it turned out to be Independence Day, a birthday, Christmas and New Year's Eve all in one, a huge Gift, beautifully gift-wrapped in the smell of settling dust and rotting meat. None of us would be here this morning, this building wouldn't be here, the incredible creative processes of the Tertiary period would never have happened if the dinosaurs had not made way for us by dying. So on that day, was Death a thief? Or a midwife?

My Grandpa Stege worked in his day's equivalent of Silicon Valley: electricity, motors and generators, new high-tech replacements for whale oil, horses and man-power. My grandpa installed the first high-pressure steam turbines at Singing prison, turbines which powered the now-infamous electric chair. He

later served as chief engineer on the dredge that built Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. Rough work with rough men in rough conditions.

My grandfather had a different rude name for every ethnicity in Europe. He had only one rude name for all the ethnicities of Africa, and one more for those of Asia. My Grandpa would actually say stuff like “Ya know Johnny, some Italians are good workers, but you can never trust ‘em! They’ll bite ya when you’re not looking, just like that dog.”

This good hardworking man was no more racist than his contemporaries, but that’s not saying much. As well as I loved him, and still do; as glad as I am that we have pictures of him holding my young children, I’m also glad he wasn’t around for their formative years, passing on stereotypes and prejudices. So, was my grandfather stolen from me, or was his passing a gift, given by him to his great-grand-children, and the hope they represented - even to him - for a better future.

I was talking about that with my daughter a few weeks ago, and she said “Yeah, Dad, just imagine if pre-civil-war plantation owners were still around running for the Senate!” We joked about how we HAVE that! But of course things ARE better, and it’s partly because dinosaurs of all kinds have their day, and then die.

I’m a dinosaur! This is my day. My day will end, maybe this afternoon, maybe fifty years from now, but it WILL end. I can hear evolution’s call for my death already, in my struggle to get the pronouns right for my transgender ... is it my niece or my nephew? The *was* or the *is*? I see it in my indignant arguments against veganism, and the implicit bias of my entire generation when it comes to race and gender. It shows up in my driving when I could bike, and using the dryer when we have a clothesline right there.

You see?, at every stage of evolutionary creativity, from the big bang right through the next election and beyond, death and loss are inextricably linked to birth and creation. Yes, Death is a thief, but also a midwife. He takes and gives with the same hands.

My life is a gift, a gift only made possible by the deaths of stars, of dinosaurs, of deep ancestors, grandparents, and the dead animals and plants I ate for breakfast this morning.

It's a gift I will pay forward by getting my spoiled 20th century butt *out of the way* of 22nd century progress, whether I like it or not. Mind you, I'm not in any hurry! It's a darn good thing death is inevitable, because I'd probably never choose it except under duress, duress that I hope to avoid if I can. Aaron and Amy weren't so lucky, and maybe I won't be, either. Death does not owe me an easy ride.

Our cultural metaphors warn us about Death as a hooded figure, stealthily approaching, approaching, coming for us. I am learning to think about it the other way around: Death is already here, inside every seed, every warm spring day, every birth, inside every pregnant moment, waiting with loving arms... for me. **I** walk towards **Death**, inexorably, inevitably. My only choice is whether to walk with my back to it, fearful and closed, or to turn and embrace death with open arms, saying "Welcome thief! Welcome friend! I'm ready. I'm ready to share forward what you gave me, so that others, *new* others, may live and breathe and create a better world after me."

Yeah, that all sounds nice, and I'm sincere in it, but it doesn't patch up the holes left by people I love who were stolen away. Thanks to folks like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, we now know that grief has many faces, and that all of them are OK and healthy, even mine. We know that those holes don't ever really get filled. Life never goes back to normal.

I still hear my grandfather's voice every time I strip a wire or use his tools, and I wish he could see my children now. I see glimpses of Aaron in his young daughters every day at school, and wish he could see how they're growing up. I think of Amy every Sunday, whether Tony is here in church or not. The holes they left never get filled, and everything is different without them.

Death is a disloyal, cheating, greedy thief. We can befriend him or not, but we can never "unfriend" him. Death and Life are an old married couple, inseparable, and together they do horrible wonderful things.

Today and every day when we remember those taken, let us celebrate their lives, mourn their deaths, and let our remembering and our tears be a gift, to ourselves, to one another, and to those who come after.

Parting Words/Benediction:

Today let us embrace Life, remembering and celebrating those who've gone before, knowing that Death's gift to us is no less than Life itself, given **to** us at birth and again with every meal, but given **by** us only once, a gift of renewal to all who come after. Let it be a Gift. Let it be a gift, and let it begin with me.