

Memorial Day Sermon: Remembering Jim Myhre

May 24, 2020

Acts: 1: 6-14

Psalm 68: 1-10, 33-36

John 17: 1-11

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Good Morning, and welcome to all of you who are part of our actual and virtual St. Peter's family. I'm Laura Palmer, priest associate at St. Peter's Glenside, and I'm glad you're here.

We traditionally honor and remember those who died in past wars on Memorial Day, but this year, we're in the midst of a pandemic; a war against an unseen enemy that leaves all of us vulnerable; defended with little more than masks, hand-washing and staying at home.

The casualties in this war are already greater than every war from Korea until today. 97, 426 Americans are dead— after only three months. Numbers hide the heartbreaking human toll. To paraphrase something a rabbi said after 9/11, 97,426 people didn't die; 1 person dies 97,246 times.

This morning we're honoring-- and remembering-- the first member of our congregation to die from Covid 19. James Myhre, a World War Two veteran, husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather, who died on May 13th in Chestnut Hill Hospital. He was 92. His beloved wife, Barbara, is recovering from Covid. Like tens of thousands of other family members, neither she, nor Jim's children, were unable to be with Jim when he died.

Jim remained selfless and generous until the end. As his condition deteriorated, doctors asked him if he wanted to be put on a ventilator with the understanding that might never be possible. Jim found the courage to say "No."

"My dad went out on his own terms," said his son, Keith. "It was his last selfless

act for my sister and me.” We didn’t have to make that decision. He was an amazing person...a kind and gentle man.”

Keith said they spoke several days before his dad died. Jim told Keith he loved him and said, “It looks like this is it.”

“This has been so difficult,” said Jim’s daughter, Marion, who desperately wanted to be at her father’s bedside. “I’m angry. I felt so helpless. I’m going through the grieving process holding on to the anger, that I was such a great distance away, it’s been really hard.”

A kind nurse held a phone near Jim and Marion spoke to him shortly before he died. “The nurse had warned me that I’d hear his breathing and it won’t sound great. I kept talking and talking away, ‘We all love you, you’ll get through this, please fight this, you’re my hero...I wanted to do so much more but I couldn’t be there.’”

Jim and Barbara Myhre’s love story is a resurrection story. Both had known each other for years and worshipped at St. Phillips. After Jim’s first wife, Joan, died. Barbara, who was widowed, was in transition and unsure of her next move. Jim had an extra bedroom and invited her to spend the summer and figure things out.

Before they knew it, their friendship blossomed into love, then marriage. Jim was 80 when they wed, Barb, 73. “Actually, Barbara is the reason we had him so long” said his son, Keith. “My mother would have approved.”

Some of their friends couldn’t believe they were getting so married because they seemed so different— Jim the extrovert, Barb, more quiet. “Well believe it!” Barbara said while acknowledging that she, too was surprised.

“Their marriage was like putting two halves together and they became a bigger whole,” said Melissa Olson, who brought them communion for several years. “They had a gentle patience and complete acceptance with each other.”

Resurrection is always surprising when new life breaks through the old, and when healing and happiness emerge from pain and sorrow. Especially later in life. Barbara said Jim “could always find the best in people, even those who weren’t the nicest.”

A close friend of Jim and his family at St. Phillips, Barb Sibley, said he was one of those people “who could always put a smile on your face, and always had a joke.” Jim also often had a song. A talented accordion player, one of that last times Jim and Barbara came to St Peter’s was for a Pancake Supper in 2019,

“Jim would have played all night,” recalled Melissa Olson. Jim’s friendliness and enthusiasm made him a natural salesman. He sold automotive parts in a business he worked in with his Dad for years.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension, which occurs 40 days after Easter and marks the moment when Jesus “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God.”

At first glance, it seems strange to celebrate Jesus’ disappearance once and for all and imagine what his disciples felt as they stared up at the sky, abandoned once again. Crucifixion, resurrection, the road to Emmaus...and now, Poof!

But dwelling too long on absence, whether it is with those we love or with Jesus, limits our ability to feel their *presence*. The resurrection proves that death is not the end. And the ascension, paradoxically, while it looks like absence, is not; it is how we understand Jesus’ presence, always. We, like the disciples, need to sharpen our vision.

The paradox of grief is that it’s ultimately a gift, one which tortures us before it heals us because the only way over is through. We resurrect the dead in our love, when we think of how they made us everything we are...and somehow, with that comes the realization that they still do.

Jim Myhre’s daughter, Marion, teaches horticulture to the blind. Her parents were passionate gardeners. Her mother grew flowers, her dad, vegetables. Jim was famous for his beefsteak tomatoes, along with strawberries, peaches and cherries, nurturing and tending to them with love.

Marion remembers the day she graduated with her master’s degree in teaching: “My dad hugged me profusely and said, ‘I Love you.’ I always knew you’d become A teacher and I am so proud of you. I am who I am because of my parents.”

Love only multiplies. As Marion guides the blind to “see” what her father made her love, he lives.

But that in no way minimizes her family's loss. 97, 426 people didn't die; 1 person dies 97, 426 times.

Jim's wife Barbara, spoke to me last week while recovering from Covid-19 but still very, very, weak:

"What would I say about the man I loved? He meant the world to me for 12 years. I can't believe he's gone."

AMEN