Healing Honor

Gal 6:2, 2 Cor. 1:3-4; Isaiah 40:1

Our second reading this morning comes from Isaiah 40:1, made famous by Handel in the “Messiah”. It reads simply, “Comfort, comfort my people.” Be the face of God for others.

You may know that archaeological evidence shows our human ancestors engaged in funeral activity 100,000 years ago. That is before modern humans even existed. It is deeply embedded in us. One way you know this is that other higher primates like Elephants, Chimpanzees, gorillas, dolphins, and whales have also been observed practicing mourning rituals quite similar to ours. It is something deeply embedded in our emotional makeup, not just humans but all higher primates.

I didn’t go into ministry to do funerals, but I grew to appreciate when they are done well, not just the ritual itself,

but the way that family and friends gather around in comfort and consolation in our seasons of grief.

Death itself is such a visceral rending. It is such a stabbing absence. Joni Mitchell had that haunting line, “The bed’s too big, the frying pans too wide.” Suddenly, we are so alone. Like a chill wind on a blustery day, with sorrow so great you're afraid to start crying because you might not be able to stop. It is a terrific spiritual wound.

I just saw a piece on Substack that said that when we experience the loss of a spouse, a child, a close friend, that loss is significant enough that our brains start to rewire themselves completely afterward. In grief, you really are going through a profound change. You are not making this up.

That sense of spiritual absence is so deep, it is haunting in a way you feel in your bones. People say, “Time heals all wounds.” And that is not true, as I was reminded this year, reflecting on September 11th. 25 years later, all that comes back in an instant. Time doesn’t heal all wounds. Redemption does.

And we do that with one another when we bestow honor on the deceased. That is what redemption is all about. Grief screams at us spiritually of absence. That is our spiritual wound. Gratitude remembers how the loved one we mourn filled our lives with the deep contentment of being loved. Gratitude remembers how we laughed together, and the perspective they taught us to embrace. Eli Wiesel once said that you can sum up the whole Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, with one word: “remember.”

Grief cries into the pillow, ‘How will I live without you?’ Gratitude recalls the blessing we have already received from their presence and the transcendent ripples of that blessing upon us even now. Psalm 77 says, “I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.” Great loves are like that.

Their life mattered. They blessed me. They blessed us. We changed for the better. We remember this together and invoke the honor of that blessing as we guide ourselves into a new and different future. We will carry forward the blessing of this one life in the beautiful way our favorite teacher lives on in us, a personality trait from Grandad takes root in the next generation, and the way our deepest friends brought out the best in us.

In John 12:24, Jesus says that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains but a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. And when we draw around each other, when we join together to extol a life that blessed us, we spiritually activate the memory of that blessing, and it radiates to everyone gathered, so that you can witness how much fruit their life nurtured.

When we grieve well with our family and friends, we don't just remember the past in nostalgia, although we do that. But honor asks us to commit ourselves to following, in a better way, what the deceased modeled. Our anchor in the past blesses us in the future, guiding us by their values and character as we make our way into a new future. We carry them with us, in a new and different way. But they help orient us, inspire us, and give us courage to step out. Sometimes it is

so profound that we can feel their presence. We keep faith with what was best in them. We let that bring out the best in us. So, Ecclesiastes 7 says, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the future of us all, and our lives bear that out.” We grow from the people who loved us, brought us into being, and brought out the best in us. Our lives are all about manifesting honor, bestowing honor on others, and guiding the next generation to live out of their honorable selves.

We honor them; we keep their spirit vital with us as we allow their love to transform us and manifest in our lives, blessing the lives around us as we live after their direction. Through the beauty of art, with the warm sentiment of the humane love that we share with each other, surrounded by the

consolation of a tender community of care, the loneliness of our sorrow is enveloped in transcendent compassion.

Lawrence mattered. Isaiah mattered. Our lives may be cut short with tragedy and frustration. Honor shines through brokenness, reflecting the prism of the light of love. Saint Paul was surely right when he said: “We have the treasure of our lives in fragile clay jars (that break so easily) to show the surpassing transcendent power of God in our lives.” Death, yes, but love and honor, more so. In the end, it is all about honor. It is all about redemption. We need each other. Will you join me as we gather around the table this morning, invoking honor and love as we draw closer together. This table gives you the spiritual sustenance you will need. Come, join us…

Our first reading this morning highlights the spiritual value of our community sharing in healing one another. Saint Paul regularly encouraged us to show compassion to one another.

In Galatians 6:2, he says, “Bear one another's burdens, for in this way you will fulfill the intention of Christ.”

Likewise, in Second Corinthians, Paul says, “God comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in affliction.” It is one of the more profound things we do together. We can become the face of the Christ for each other.