

WEEKLY LETTER FROM MONSIGNOR KEN

Painful. Difficult. Confusing. Overwhelming. Unbearable. These are just some of many words that can describe our feelings in the face of death. Grief is, unfortunately, a part of life. During this month of All Souls, we are reminded of that reality. Anniversaries, birthdays, and special occasions are also painful triggers. Confronted with this reality, it is important that we are honest. We must acknowledge the pain of death. No one likes it. I think too often, because we have faith, we can dismiss grief too quickly. Simply saying, "They're in a better place;" "It's God's will;" "They're suffering is over;" and the like. While true, can too easily dismiss our sadness and pain. Denying grief can actually prolong it and make it more intense. Simple statements of faith, while well-intentioned, can fill us with guilt. We can think, "What's wrong with me?" Ironically, that can also enhance grief and make it last longer. Yes, we need to heal and move along in the process of grief, but it begins with acknowledging and accepting the pain.

Everyone knows the wonderful song made popular by Josh Groban, You Raise Me Up. While originally meant as a reminder of the need to give and receive human comfort, it appropriately has been adopted with a spiritual meaning. The "You" of the song is for people of faith, God. That is our ultimate source of peace and healing. We grieve, we cry, we are sad, but at the same time, we trust God and know He is with us. As Christians, we find great comfort in the cross, a symbol that God is with us in our suffering, our lowest points.

I have a story that I've shared many times, even at funerals, that captures that truth for me. I hope it helps you know that the Lord is with you in your need, in your grief. As a kid growing up, our aunt and uncle lived next door. In their back yard, there was a big cherry tree, not like the ones you see that blossom in spring, but a big one with a large trunk reaching up about twenty-five feet. It was an open invitation for me as an active boy to climb. One day I accepted that invitation and excitedly shimmied up the tree, higher and higher. It was both fun and exhilarating, until I noticed where I was and how high above the ground. I suddenly realized that I was afraid of heights! It was too late. There I was, terrified. Despite the encouraging calls to come down, I was frozen, hugging the trunk for dear life. I was not moving. Finally, Hugh Johnson, the biggest kid in the neighborhood and who lived right across the street, came to my rescue. He climbed the tree and reached me, finally convincing me to let go, grab on to him, and down we went. He literally saved me that day!

For me, that story is more than just a childhood memory. It's a real-life illustration of what Jesus does for us. When we are stuck in fear, loneliness, grief, sadness, and, yes, sin, He comes and sits, not just awhile, but as long as it takes, with us. "When I am down and oh, my soul, so weary; When troubles come and my heart burdened be; Then I am still and wait here in the silence; Until You come and sit awhile with me." The second verse of that song has words that we can also relate to our faith, thinking of Jesus stretching out His arms on the cross; "I am strong when I am on Your shoulders."

In our humanity, we will never fully understand death. We have to, in humility, acknowledge our helplessness before this mystery. At the same time, we also have to trust in the Lord, and His Resurrection. Ultimately, He and He alone is our peace. This month of November, the month of All Souls, is a special time to remember, to grieve, to honor and to pray. It is also a time, along with our grief, to reaffirm our trust in the Lord and the Resurrection. We miss our loved ones, but Heaven is real. Even if crying from time to time, open your eyes, and see Him coming to sit awhile with you.

"When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, He became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to Him, 'Sir, come and see.' And Jesus wept." (John 11:33-35)