
Real, but not Final

Someone I loved died last fall. Tony, a professor of American literature, was my faculty advisor in college and, later on, a friend. He lived a long life, one that had its share of ups and downs—perhaps, on balance, more downs than many of us experience. He had a daughter, you see, who died of cancer when she was only four years old, and this affected him profoundly. There were other sadnesses as well, yet Tony was a man who was relentlessly hopeful. I cannot recall a time I ran into him on campus when he did not greet me with his trademark impish grin. He had a frequent twinkle in his eye, one that suggested he was privy to some great cosmic joke a lot of people didn't get but that he kept trying to share because he wanted others to be in on the fun, too.

Hundreds of moving tributes poured in after Tony's death. One in particular has stuck with me. Reflecting on the emotional, physical, and spiritual trials of living through a global pandemic, its author wrote: "In this season of torment, we should offer gratitude for the life of this kind man who would have reminded us that the torment is real, but not final."

The torment is real, but not final. I've been holding these words in my heart ever since I read them. They have been especially comforting during the last few weeks—weeks in which crisis upon crisis has assaulted our country and our world even as so many of us continue to face our own personal struggles. *The torment is real, but not final.* Here, it strikes me, is the essence of our Christian faith—the conviction that while sin and death may do their worst, they are not the last words about human existence. Neither are the Delta variant, overflowing ICUs, suicide bombings, earthquakes, fractured relationships, racism, poverty, mental illness, loneliness, wildfires, or catastrophic storms.

There have always been some traditions that encourage Christians to pretend as if pain and sorrow are somehow illusions. Jesus didn't actually suffer on the cross, one movement in the early Church called Docetism asserted—he merely appeared to do so. Have a positive attitude, some celebrity preachers proclaim today, and everything'll be fine. The reality, of course, is that bad, even horrific, things do happen, sometimes all at once. No amount of positive thinking will change this. We cannot wish away, or pray away, every hardship that assaults us.

And yet we do not lose hope. My eight-year-old says frequently, "I hate this stupid coronavirus! I hate it!" To which I reply, "I hate it, too, Sweetie. I wish I could wave a magic wand and make it go away." I can't, of course, so I do my best to try to comfort her. I sit down with her on the floor and hold her in my arms. I stroke her hair and ask if she'd like something to eat, maybe a cookie or two. I remind her of all the happy times we've had in the past and promise her that we will have these times again. I call to mind other hard things we've had to do and how we got through them together. In this way, I reassure both my daughter and myself that though the torment is real, it is not final.

Something similar happens each Sunday when we gather here at the cathedral. We tell stories of how God's people lived through—and overcame—evil and despair in days of old. We share one another's present joys and sorrows. We ask God to be with us as we seek a better future. We have something to eat—not cookies, but the Bread of Life. We eat at the table of One whose very death proved to be not the end, but the beginning.

Dear friends, with God's help, you and I will come through this dark time. This I believe with all my heart. If you cannot believe it right now, though, that's all right. You are not failing yourself or anyone else because of your doubt or despair. Rest for a while, knowing that others will believe for you. Even now, as you read this, there are those holding space for you in the realm of hope, joy, comfort, and peace. The torment is real, but not final.

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