

A Homily for the Memorial Service and Eucharist for Sam Lahr August 29, 2009

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

There are a number of reasons we're gathered today, among them: to remember, to pray, to share our sorrow, to gather strength and comfort from each other and from the Christian tradition, to participate in one step of a long, complex process of closure. For those of us who are Christians, there is another reason: to examine our own responses, in the light of Christ, to a somber and terrible event, the death by suicide of an essentially sweet and loving young man who could not find a place in this world.

Now the Christian response to any event, especially those hard to understand and to bear, has two parts: compassion and self-examination. Compassion first, always, always, always, a foundation of compassion first. Without it, our response too easily becomes one of blame — it is, somehow, the victim's fault, or someone else's fault, or even our own. Remember that to establish responsibility for an event is not necessarily to create love in relation to it. And Christianity is about the creation of love within every framework of human existence. When one is interested in knowing who is responsible there is a danger of being relieved, if not secretly glad, because then we can talk about their (or our) responsibility and so become spectators to pain rather than experience it.

I must be blunt here. Not only is our culture a pain avoiding one, there are Christians who, to avoid pain, will even make God responsible for suffering and death, using such phrases as "Trust in God's plan, he has a purpose for everything that happens" or "God must have wanted him badly to take him so young." Or "What do you think God is trying to teach you through this experience?" Such phrases are legion, and every last one is theological drivel. If the cross, the central event of the Christian story, means anything, it means that God suffers with and for his creation, not that he causes, plans, or seeks to teach us through pain and tragedy. God may be able to bring good out of evil, but he never, ever, commits evil that good may come from it. If responsibility for suffering and death can be palmed off on God, then, despite appearances, everything must be all right. If it is, then I don't have to look at myself, at my responses to this, or any, terrible reality. All I have to do is figure out who is responsible — and my part stops there. I have moved from participant to spectator and so disentangled myself from suffering and death. And I reject any God who does not leave me my pain, tears and the ache of loss that comes to all of us, if we are willing to feel it. These things are human things, without them we are less than ourselves. God shares them and we move through them, not around them, to the kingdom.

Here I want to take a short Biblical excursus. I won't come to any conclusions, but leave you with a question or two which may — or may not — be useful in the second part of the Christian's response, self-examination. When describing the kingdom of God Jesus picks, as illustrations and examples, people who didn't fit in or were relegated to the margins of the ordinary

successful society of his day. The tax collector, the possessed, the heretic Samaritan, the foreign widow, the slave, and the list goes on. One of my more intelligent students coined a word to describe the experience of these people – the word “unhomeliness,” which she described as a condition not so much of lack of place, but of lack of connection with all that the society believes of value. To experience unhomeliness is to lack the ability to make a place of meaning for oneself in this world. These people Jesus uses to announce the Kingdom were not and could not be at home in the world because the world was constructed against them. To be a slave, or a foreign widow, or a heretic, determined not just the daily round of your life, but whether you could ever hope to be at home in this world. And it had nothing to do with what you did, only with what you were. Even children were unhomely, tolerated because they would grow into adults, not valued because of what they were, as children.

Sam’s, favorite hymn, “Let all mortal flesh keep silence” which we will sing later in this service, pictures Christ overcoming unhomeliness. In it, Christ descends into this world from heaven, to lift those here to heaven through his own life. It is a hymn in which unhomeliness is overcome, because all that is mortal must become equally silent, those who ordinarily have a voice and call the shots must stand in fear and trembling — finally equal with those who don’t know what to say, or don’t know how to say it, or who are just different enough that we can’t hear them when they speak to us. And in verse three, in which the light of Christ causes the powers of hell to vanish and the darkness to be cleared away, this picture of salvation is one of the destruction of the capacity of the world to be evil, not one of success at virtue for some while others, for whatever reasons, are either marginal or outside the sphere of God. This picture of Hell and darkness vanishing in the presence of Christ contains a promise even for those who can never meet the standards the world creates for itself, and then calls holy. The implication of this hymn is that Christ is for those who are not at home here because his overcoming of evil is absolute and universal. We examine ourselves (and others) it’s usually in terms of success or failure, right or wrong. We do not ask concerning unhomeliness, so our self-examination is of success and failure, not the universal love of God. I can see why a young man troubled by his lack of ability to be successfully at home in this world would respond powerfully to these images.

Ordinary standards always divide us into the good and the not so good, the successful from the marginal Christian, those who make it at life in this world from those for whom it will always be a doubtful venture. Ordinary standards divide even those whom we can understand from those we cannot. Yet may not the test of Christian life be loving that and those whom we do not and cannot understand?

So when we ask ourselves how we shall respond to Sam’s death, remember the Unhomeliness, the out-of-placeness of those whom Jesus named as the foundations of the kingdom, the signs of the life of God in this world. It is through remembering them, being aware of them that we begin to grasp the truly transcendent nature of God’s love.

So if we are wise, in seeking to formulate our response to Sam’s death, we will let his perhaps inarticulate spiritual wisdom – displayed in his hymn selection – speak to us even from across the abyss of death. Remember the unhomely. Remember that Christ chose them as a means to

speaking about the Kingdom of God. The foundation of a Christian response to this somber and terrible event is remembering.

Now, a word about Sam himself. Him we need not worry about – miss dreadfully and painfully yes, worry about his ultimate fate, no. The Christian tradition has not been kind to suicide. The Christian tradition has also been wrong about many things, and this is one of them. I am convinced that for him, the darkness has cleared away, he has entered the realm of endless day and the powers of hell have vanished through that love of God in whose presence sorrow and sighing cease and every tear is wiped away.. And as thoroughly as I believe that, I don't have visiting privileges in that realm and neither do any of you, so grief is appropriate. And don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Take your own time living it through and pay no attention to those who would have you return to normal for their comfort.