

Isaiah 43: 1-3; Psalm 46; Revelation 21: 2-7; Matthew 5: 1-16

According to Jim's older sister, Jean, Jim was lovable from day one. He was a good person his whole life she said. What a marvelous tribute from a sibling! Thank you Jean for being such a wonderful and supportive sister to our brother Jim.

This past week has been full of stories and remembrances from the wide circle of friends that Jim has left behind. Consistently they have spoken about how Jim lived his life with integrity and authenticity. He intentionally chose to live simply caring for the earth and for others. He was not apologetic about his choices which in this day and age is a wonderful attribute. You see his mindset and his values, in the Scriptures Jim chose for this service.

Brother Robert L'Esperance of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist might have been thinking of Jim when he wrote:

A simpler lifestyle can be a way to share with those who have less and a way of returning to them what is usurped by unjust social and economic structures. Assuming a stance of under-consumption can be a provocative invitation to others into a conversation about affluence, poverty and social justice.¹

The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel was central to how Jim lived and the causes to which he devoted his life. He regularly mentored those who needed guidance and help getting their lives back on track. He always had hope that the witness he and others provided might be part of what helped some who spent time in jail or prison find a new way to live that resulted from better choices. His leadership at Celebrate Recovery, the Mankind Project and in so many other endeavors was a light to those participating and to the wider world. Even so, I never heard Jim "preach." Rather he led and gave comfort through his presence and quiet conversation.

Jim spent countless hours canoeing. He cared deeply for Sugar Creek, through education, serving on the Advisory Board, and speaking out at community meetings. He chose to live simply on the creek so that he could be close to nature – God's creation from which he drew sustenance. Jim believed deeply that we have an obligation to care for this earth in all of its various forms. To that end, he went every year up to a renewable energy conference in Wisconsin where he camped, learned and shared his desire to see us become better stewards of the earth.

While Jim found God easily in nature, he was also a faithful member of St. John's since 1988. One of the things I found endearing about Jim was that in the summer he would come to St. John's for our 8am service and then take off to be present at another service at another church. He loved getting out and about and experiencing the many ways we are one body, one church. And, on Mondays I would find a bulletin from that church in my mailbox with his comments about things he liked and things that we at St. John's might think about! Jim was marvelously open to the many ways in which people find God and the many ways in which we worship the one who created us, who loved us into being.

Jim was curious. He would come and ask me about any number of theological questions. I'm sure he also asked many of you about this or that- something that had piqued his interest and he wanted more follow-up before making up his own mind about the topic. An inquiring mind is a good way to describe that part of Jim.

¹ <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm#inbox/159172b5d347da18> (Dec. 19, 2016)

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These last seven months have been a hard road to travel for Jim and for his caregivers and friends. Jim was most grateful for your support and well wishes as he took this journey. Through it all, he remained firmly rooted in his faith. Jim understood and took into his very being the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God (Is. 43: 1-3).

These words comforted the people of Israel who had been deported to Babylon. They longed for a return to their homeland even as the world around them had changed into something they did not recognize. It was a time of great turmoil and uncertainty. And yet, even so, the God of Israel was present to the people and through the prophet reminded them that nothing they were experiencing would set them so far apart from God that the relationship would be broken. That's what Jim found important about this passage. Nothing that we can do can separate us from the love and the presence of God. God is with us whatever our life circumstances may be. Throughout these last several months, Jim held on to the belief that God was present even as Jim's future included physical death.

Jim knew that his physical death was not the end but rather a transformation. Through the death of Christ and his resurrection, we who believe will be reunited with God and our loved ones when it is our turn to die. Even as we grieve, we can rest assured that the words in The Revelation to John are true:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' (Rev. 21: 2-7).

As we grieve Jim's physical death, the loss of our earthly companion, remember that Jim believed in his future with God.

Jim knew that God was his refuge and his strength. God was his help in his troubles these last months. So Jim did not need to fear even though the earth moved and what he might have hoped for did not come to be. Jim could ask questions of good friends about their experiences with the faith of their loved ones who died to consider as he walked his own journey and his ultimate destination.

Our Book of Common Prayer reminds us:

The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we too, shall be raised.

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The liturgy, therefore, is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend. So, while we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn. (BCP 507)

Fundamental to Jim's life were the many relationships he had. Relationships of long term and of short term mattered to Jim. The connection of one to another is the cement that held his life together and gave it meaning. Following this service, I invite you to join us in Whitlock Hall and to share those stories with others. Stories give us comfort and connect us to Jim, our brother, who has finished his life on earth. The greatest tribute we can give to Jim is to share how he impacted our lives through his life and faith. Laugh, cry, but above all remember that one the Lord gave to us: James M. Suren. **Amen.**