

Jeff Avon Funeral Mass / October 10, 2003
St. Mary, Mechanicsville, Iowa
Father Jon Seda

Along with Father Doyle and all the people of St. Mary's, I want to begin by expressing our deep sympathy to Vicki and Cliff, to Amy and Scott, to Megan and Tom, and to all of Jeff's family and friends. We know this past week has been very difficult for you, and want you to know that we have and continue to lift you up in prayer.

I first met Jeff when he was a student at Iowa State. I served in campus ministry, and lived across the street from the Delta Sig fraternity, which was an interesting experience. I don't remember first meeting Jeff, although I think it was probably in a bar in campus town and not at Mass.

What I liked about Jeff was his great sense of playfulness. Unlike so many at Iowa State, he did not take life too seriously, and was always up for some fun, maybe even when he should not have been. Jeff and I played racquetball together. Even when it was at the last minute, if I was having a stressful day and needed to laugh, I would call Jeff, and he always seemed to find time to play.

Jeff was not good at racquetball. In fact, he was awful. But I loved playing him because he was so much fun. He could make me forget the troubles of the day and he would laugh at my adolescent humor. At first, when Jeff would make a bad shot, he would yell, "Ah nuts!" I found this funny, and told him I had not heard such an expression since fourth grade. I told him he could use big boy language when on the racquetball court, and that I wouldn't tell anyone.

Jeff and I kept in touch after he and I both left Ames about the same time. I have made it a practice to go to Ireland every year since then. Less than a year ago, Jeff and I made plans to go over. We had the tickets and everything lined up. He was looking forward to playing Ireland's exceptional golf courses. We both were looking forward to hanging out in the pubs and talking to the local Irishfolk, who love to tell stories, some of which are actually true.

But like life, our plans did not go as planned. The Air Force took away the vacation time he had saved up, and he could not go. As sometimes happened to Jeff, his sense of duty outweighed his desire to be playful.

It is with very heavy hearts that we gather this morning to mourn Jeff's death. In all my years as a priest, if there were ever a time when I wish I had a magic wand that could make everything okay, it would be today. But I don't.

What I do have is faith. I don't have faith that will take away the pain of losing Jeff in the prime of his life. I don't have faith that will ease the anger at the way he was taken from us. I don't have faith that will answer all the questions about how God could let something like this happen to such a good guy.

But I do have faith in God. In Isaiah, we hear that God's ways are not our ways, and that God's thoughts are above our thoughts. But to be honest, such words do not help much on such a tough day as today. We are so full of heartache, of anger, even of rage, that words cannot express fully what so many of us feel today.

To say that God's thoughts are not our thoughts is not to say that God wanted this to happen. He did not. God's will is always for life, and never for death.

To say that God's ways are not our ways does mean that a mature Christian is able to live with mystery, to be comfortable not having all the answers to life's questions. Today we have so many questions and so few answers. But faith tells us that life and death are full of mystery, and our finite human minds do not understand everything.

But I do believe that God is alive in our midst today. In the past week, we have seen the worst of humanity. We have also seen the best of humanity, in the way people have come together to bear one another's burdens.

I do believe that God is alive in our midst today, when we shed tears out of love, when we share the courage that comes from our faith, and when we commit ourselves to the vision of love that Jeff showed us in his all too short life with us.

And I do believe that God is alive in our midst today in the hope that we share. St. Paul said that as Christians, we grieve like others. And we do grieve today with broken hearts. But St. Paul also said that we do not grieve like the others who have no hope.

And that is what makes Christians different. Hope. Our hope today is not in Jeff's goodness, and not in our goodness, but in the goodness of God, fully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a hope first given to Jeff on the day of his baptism, the greatest day of his life from the point of view of eternity. On that day, the Lord said to Jeff, "You are my beloved son. I will never, ever abandon you in life or in death."

That hope tells us that the story of Jeff's life does not end in Arkansas, and it does not end in the grave. His story is now joined with the stories of the saints. His story will last forever, and we will be with him again.

Jeff would be embarrassed to be called a saint I think. And yet, in his own unique way, I think he is. That does not mean he was perfect. No, his faults were there for all to see. But so was his very real virtue.

Jeff was a man of love. A deep love of his family, of his fraternity brothers (well, at least most of you), and of his country. Even though his decisions to serve others, especially in the military, cost him, he did it with pride and integrity.

Jeff was a man of compassion. Yes, he did have his playful side, which made him so likeable. He also had a deeper side not everyone saw. He had a special place in his heart for those who found life difficult. He was very kind to those with troubles, including me. And this made him so loveable. He became a son you could be proud of, a brother you could look up to, and a friend that you could count on.

And Jeff was a man of dedication. His life had ideals to which he aspired to live up to. They were unselfish ideals, and included a deep loyalty to those he called friends. In the end, it is a sad irony that this virtue cost him his life. And yet, Jeff could do no less. That is who he was and what he stood for.

This week has been tough for all of us who loved Jeff. So full of so many emotions. So full of regrets for what could have been. So full of sadness for who we have lost.

So where do we go from here? When I worked in campus ministry, one of the reoccurring issues I dealt with were Christians who reduced what faith was to which rules to follow and who gets into heaven and who doesn't. For me, faith is not simply about life after death, but also about having some life before death. Faith is not just about getting some ticket into heaven, but about the depth and quality of our life on earth.

Sometimes students would ask me what difference faith makes. What I have come to believe is this---every major event in our life, whether one of victory or one of tragedy, will change us, one way or the other. And what determines how these events change us is faith.

In my years of listening to people's faith stories, I am amazed at how an almost identical experience may happen to different people, and yet how differently they respond to it. A young couple has a child with a birth defect that will impair her for life. A mother re-enacts the Pieta, where Mary holds the lifeless body of her only son. A daughter has to take care of his father who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Sometimes these great challenges of life defeat us. They make us bitter, and angry, and cynical, and closed off to God and others.

But with faith, we become better, not bitter. I've seen people face great sorrow, great tragedy, and great challenge with faith, and become more compassionate, more loving, more like Jesus.

What is the difference? Faith. And that is the hope and prayer I have for us today. That our faith not just be a creed we profess every Sunday, but knowing the power of God, who can make us better people instead of bitter people, even when we know great tragedy in our lives.

So where do we go from here? It would be easy for us to be bitter and angry at the young woman who took Jeff from us. To be honest, I have those same feelings for her. And yet the only way I know to be free from these, at least according to Jesus, is forgiveness. Most of us are miles away from this today. We have every right to be full of anger at her for what she has did to Jeff and to us.

And I think that is okay to feel that way for sometime. But eventually, the only way to be free from the power she has in our lives is to forgive her.

When I was at Iowa State, one of the speakers we brought in to speak at the university was Fr. Marty Jenco. He was a Catholic priest who was held as a hostage and tortured in Beirut for 19 months. I saw him on TV one day, and heard his story. It was so beautiful that it was definitely of God. I wrote him to see if he would come and speak at Iowa State.

And to my amazement, he accepted. He came to Ames. I called him to see if he wanted a little drink before he went out to supper with us. He said yes. I asked him what he liked. He said gin. I am a scotch man myself, so went over to Fr. Supple and asked him what the best gin was. He said Tanguiray. So I got a big bottle of Tanguiray gin. And over the next few evenings, we sat in my apartment and talked and laughed and drank. He almost finished that large bottle in three evenings.

But my great memory of Fr. Jenco was him sitting on my couch, laughing and telling stories. In a moment of seriousness, he said to me, "You know Jon, I hated those people for what they did to me. I just wanted to be free of it all. I so much wanted to be released and come back to America. But I realized in prayer, that if I still hated them, I would still be their hostage. I would still give them power over my life and whether I would ever be happy in life again. And the only way I could truly be free again was to forgive them. And so with the grace of God, I did."

Perhaps today is too soon and the pain is too deep to forgive what was done to Jeff. But we need to make that our goal. We are too weak to do it on our own power. Forgiveness is a grace we need to pray for from God. Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling---and a decision that we need to make over and over and over again. Forgiveness is not a favor we are doing her, it is a favor we are doing for ourselves. And it is the only way we will be free to know joy again.

Where do we go from here? Many of us have asked a hard question this past week---why did Jeff have to die? If you ask me that question, my answer is that God did not want this to happen. None of us did. But it did. And I don't know why God let this happen to Jeff.

But maybe we are asking the wrong question. Perhaps we should ask, why did Jeff live? That question I have many answers for. As many answers as there are people in this packed church this morning. Jeff lived so that we might know something of the goodness of God. Jeff lived so that we might feel something of the love that God has for us. Jeff lived so that we might learn to be more playful and less serious, and enjoy each day the way that he did.

Today teaches us that life is fragile, that life is short, and that life is pure gift. Whether we live to be 27 or 97, we are given only so many years to learn how to love God and how to love one another. From the point of view of eternity, it is our lovespan, and not our lifespan, that really counts.

Today we return Jeff to the Author of his life. We do so with broken hearts, because he had so much more to do, he so much more potential for doing good, and he was so deeply loved.

But we also do so with hope. Hope that we will see him again. Hope that one day our sorrow will turn into gratitude. Hope that one day we will remember Jeff not with tears but with a smile.

Jeff, today we thank you for the goodness, the playfulness and the compassion you put into our lives. We are all better people because God has let us know and love you.

I'm personally sorry that we never made it to Ireland so that you could golf the best courses in the world. But I suspect you have already found even more grand courses to play in heaven.

Please permit me to conclude with a familiar Irish blessing, with one minor change. I think it expresses what is in all of our hearts this day:

Jeff,
May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
The rains fall soft upon your golf course,
And, until we meet again . . . and we will,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

Amen.