

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.