

Sr. Noreen Nolan's wake and funeral were a tribute to her life as a Dominican Sister of Sparkill and an educator, teacher and principal. Here is the homily given by Bishop Jerry Walsh at her funeral Mass today.

Sister Noreen Nolan, O.P.

As we begin may I express sincere condolences to:

- Sister Noreen's family for their loss of someone so close to them at all times, but especially in these last 20 months when she received such dedicated and devoted treatment from all of you during her illness;
- to the Dominican Sisters of Sparkill for the earthly loss of a very fine religious sister - one who lived her promises and kept her vows in an exemplary manner;
- to the educational community of St. Elizabeth Parish - faculty, students and staff - for the loss of a very committed principal and educator - committed to helping each of you develop to the best of your ability all of the talents the Lord has given you;
- to her co-workers in the apostolate of Catholic education who gained so much from her insight and her leadership for so many years.

We have gathered in this beautiful Chapel today to remember the life of Sister Noreen Nolan and to celebrate God's gift of life eternal. When death comes to one we love, time seems to stand still as grief and sorrow rudely move into our lives. For many, grief brings with it physical pain, a gnawing feeling within that can only be described as emptiness. And yet, into the reality of sorrow and pain comes a gift from our Lord's life that can give us strength today and hope for tomorrow as we remember the gift that was Sister Noreen's life.

One evening during that last week of Jesus' life, he took a meal at a friend's house in the village of Bethany. We know the friend's name as "Simon the Leper" which tells us so much about our Lord. In that society long ago, to dine with a leper would have been high on the list of ultimate taboos. Lepers were considered unclean, persons who were expected to live apart from the rest of society.

But heeding social conventions and being politically correct was never high on our Lord's list of obligations. Rather, he chose to eat with outcasts, hobnob with sinners, and hang out with those who more respectable people deemed unworthy. Jesus seemed bent on showing up in places and with people others considered worthless.

On this night in Simon's home, as friends gathered around our Lord for dinner, a woman slipped into the house carrying a very expensive jar of perfume. In that day, people would save for years to purchase costly perfumes they would put away and use only for the burial of loved ones. So it was this night that a nameless woman broke an alabaster jar filled with fragrant perfume and poured it on our Lord's head.

This audacious act of devotion, so strange to our social custom, was beyond the comprehension of those reclining at table. The whispering soon modulated to a din of murmurings: "Who is this?" "This ointment could have been sold for a ransom and the money given to the poor!" Jesus let them talk for awhile and then interrupted. "Leave her alone!" he said. "She has done a beautiful thing to me."

In a word, Jesus praised her extravagant gift. Soon, guards would arrest him. Soon, the lash of a whip would scourge him. Soon, a mob would call for his death and soldiers would peg him to a cross. But for now, the ominous specter of

death would have to stand at a distance as this woman, filled with love, gave the costliest gift she could imagine to the One whose life was pure gift.

I wonder what God would say to us from this story about the gift that is life? How tempted we are when death visits to focus on what we have lost. With near predictability, we ask “Why?” and rightly mourn the loss of companionship, laughter, and devotion. Yes, it is good and appropriate to grieve these and many more losses. But what if we could, for a few minutes – and in moments yet to come – think about Sister Noreen’s life for the extravagant gift that it was and still is?

For one thing, we would celebrate life through our tears. When death comes, we are wise to grieve. Such grief often erupts in unexpected ways with tears of sorrow, even to the point of being uncontrollable. And when grief shows up with such emotion, we are tempted to hide our sorrow as if grief’s tears were cause for shame. The woman’s boldness in this story suggests that we would be wise to acknowledge our grief as a reminder that Sister Noreen’s life was precious. We of faith dare embrace our tears as God’s reminder that life is gift.

Most of us take our health for granted until we lose it. More than a few of us know the pain of a broken heart only to discover later, on the other side of sorrow, that great strength came to us in those awful moments. And so it is that God comes to us in the breaking of Eucharistic bread, in the breaking of the day, in the brokenness of grief to release the fragrant gift that is life. And when God comes, when life is broken beyond anything we can comprehend, the perfume of grace drips on our brow, not to minimize our loss, but to maximize God’s presence and love.

That night long ago in Simon’s house may be the very picture from God’s word we could hang on the wall of our broken hearts. For there in Bethany, as

death was lurking in the streets of Jerusalem, our Lord gave a woman permission to celebrate his life with uncommon extravagance. We of faith would do well to celebrate life today. Yes, death has torn from our hearts one whose very being was beyond precious. Yes, we cannot see the end of this broken road called grief. But yes, with God's help, we can hold in our mind's deepest and fondest memory the gift of Sister Noreen's life. Her life was God's gift to all of us; fragrant, extravagant, costly, precious, unforgettable.

Sister Noreen celebrated God's many gifts to her in the way Jesus asks - use and develop them in the service of others - a dedicated religious life; an other centered career in education; a sharing of individual talents to promote the common good.

The readings at this Mass ask and encourage us to do the same - Isaiah tells us - feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, do not turn your back on your own - be a light in the darkness around you, Paul reminds us of our partnership with the gospel - may our love for the Lord and His people increase our good works and the promotion of good values in society. Finally Matthew reminds us of the qualities necessary for a follower of the Lord - poor in spirit, clean of heart, merciful, a peacemaker - do you remember the peace garden in memory of those killed in the World Trade Center and in the Dominican air crash?

The St. Elizabeth graduation class of 2009 dedicated their yearbook to Sister Noreen on the occasion of her 20<sup>th</sup> year as Principal. The students wrote:

"We all know there are many committed teachers, administrators and staff at St. Elizabeth School, but few people have dedicated as much time and energy to our wonderful school as our principal Sr. Noreen Nolan, O.P. During twenty years of outstanding service she has nurtured students, guided staff and

demonstrated how best to live our lives in the Catholic tradition. Sr. Noreen has given so much of herself to her vocation and St. Elizabeth School over the past two decades. We all feel blessed to have known her”.

The students got it right.

Life is gift. As Sister Noreen lived life among us and now enjoys life eternal with our Lord, we of faith can offer our broken lives to the One who died and rose again and in so doing, celebrate life in all its fragrant, costly wonder. Amen.

by Bishop Jerry Walsh