

Funeral Sermon for Joe and Mary Monti

It's almost as if Mary and Joe had a point to prove about how beautiful and painful life can be. Two people love each other imperfectly but all the way for their whole lives, raise wonderful children, two of whom go on to raise their own wonderful children into young adults, and then die within a week of each other. Their lives were real and sometimes gritty and often hard, but their end was the stuff of pop songs, of fairy tales. I'm going to tell two stories and then talk about God, but first I just want us all to note *this*, a sacrament of the searing, deep-cutting beauty that sometimes shines through the dross of the world to remind us what an incredible un-earnable privilege it is to get to be human beings who love each other. Joe and Mary in their deaths have escorted us to very holy ground indeed, to the edge of the mystery of why any of us bother to be here. It is for this kind of love, that stares down death together, that enables two people to go even into death not with fear, but with the courage and peace that only love brings.

My last real conversation with Joe happened a few days before he went into the hospital. He was still at home, but Mary was bouncing back and forth between different floors of the hospital and rehab. And Joe couldn't find her. He called the church frantic, because he needed to know that Mary was okay. He needed help making sure that Mary was okay—that someone who loved her was with her or on their way, wherever she was. This is the last real memory I'll have of Joe: of someone who wouldn't quit until he knew that his wife was surrounded by love and care.

My last real conversation with Mary happened a couple days after Joe had died. She was in the hospital and while we had been scampering around to try to find a plan that could get her here for Joe's funeral, the hospital had started conversations about hospice care. Mary was supposed to sleep on the decision about whether or not to go into hospice and while the family talked in the hallway I went in to steal a moment alone with her. I asked her, "While we're alone, is there anything you want to say that you can't say to the boys?"

And she looked me in the eyes with the clarity that was getting harder for her to muster and asked, "Are the kids okay?" I told her what she already knew: that she and Joe had raised them, that they had built beautiful families of their own, that they were and would be okay. That grief is a part of healing, and they would be both heartbroken and okay. She nodded and said, "I think hospice is the right thing to do." This is the last real memory I'll have of Mary: of someone who was ready to die, but would still be here now if she wasn't absolutely sure that her beloveds would be okay. Mary was able to die because she and Joe had loved Joe, David, and Amy so well, and Joe and David and the Brendas have loved their kids so well. It's a weird phrase, but her death was a well-earned mercy.

The death of people we love is supposed to teach us something about being alive. Mary and Joe in their deaths have taught me something about fierce love. A love that

isn't always easy or perfect, sure, but that will not quit and will draft in help when necessary. A love that will fight off even death if it has to, but trusts enough in itself and God to let go when its work is done. This kind of fierce love is what life is for, and it is a gift from God. The love that is the point of life isn't always easy, and at times God carries us and helps other people carry us when we can't love the way we want to. But we are made for love and to love, each other and God. We are made by love and to be loved, by each other and God. We are grieving, but we never have to stop loving. Joe and Mary have shown us how. Amen.