

We gather today to celebrate the life and ministry of “an oak of righteousness,” Joe Di Paola, and to commend his soul to Almighty God. We honor Joe as a passionate and indefatigable servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, a faithful, loving husband, father and friend, and a true churchman.

Father Joe always began his sermons here with a funny story. In memory of him, that is how I must begin today. Sunday before last, I went to greet Joe and Betty before the 10:30 service. Joe said “You’re preaching, aren’t you? Are you preaching about sin? Are you agin’ it?”

Humor was Joe’s hallmark. And he left us with countless funny stories. Even while friends gathered in Seton Hospital last week to comfort Betty and the other members of the family and share in their grief at Joe’s impending death, tears would give way to laughter as the latest arrival shared a favorite Joe story.

Joe’s funny stories when he was interim here 8 years ago, surprised me. I was a newly graduated seminarian, whom he had called to be his assistant. I guess I thought that preaching was a serious business.

Of course, preaching **was** very serious business to Joe—too serious to be done by someone who took **himself** seriously. So humor was an important element in Joe’s preaching. In fact, it was fundamental—in his entire ministry.

Humor is also the portal through which I’d like to look on three of Joe’s most salient and Christ-like gifts: namely, humility, healing, and hospitality.

First, humility. Joe was usually the butt of his own funny stories. Larry Carpenter remembered the one where Joe was stopped by a traffic cop. He pled not to be given a ticket. “Please,” Joe said, “don’t you know I’m just a poor preacher?” The cop replied, “I know that: I’ve heard your sermons.”

Joe knew that to lay people any priest has an unfair advantage. After all, we wear collars and dresses and we speak from high places amplified by microphones. He also knew that

some people were fearful of what any preacher might say to them—inside or outside the pulpit. His humor leveled the playing field--telling everyone that he was just like them, an ordinary guy. It put his flock at ease and opened their hearts to hear the powerful gospel proclamation that followed.

Joe's humor was fundamental to his role as a healer. It was part of his genius as an interim--probably in other places, and surely here at St. Matthew's. This congregation had suffered through very unhappy partings with its two previous rectors. The pain of those separations and the divisions they caused was palpable. So, too, was the loss of confidence that things could ever be right again. For bruised feelings and broken relationships, Joe's humor was the proverbial balm in Gilead. He helped restore the love of Christ to make this wounded congregation whole again.

Likewise, Joe's humor was deeply hospitable and often theological. Here's one of my favorites in that vein: "Do you know why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners? Otherwise he would have eaten alone!" Otherwise he would have eaten alone. In other words—we all are sinners. We all are the same. We all are redeemed through God's gracious hospitality alone—a hospitality embodied in Jesus' table fellowship. Joe's version of that table fellowship was the gumbo feast for which he is famous. Everything about those feasts brought people together: as we shared in the cooking, the eating **and** the massive task of cleaning up!

Hospitality was the ultimate response to the compassion that lay at the center of Joe's priestly vocation. In a sad situation, he was as able and ready to weep with someone as he was normally to laugh. Joe knew that he was called—like Jesus—to reach out in particular "to the last, the least and the lost." Joe believed that there were NO outsiders in Jesus' kingdom vision—none—and he lived that way, too. Hence, I think, his choice of John 14 for his funeral gospel. "In my father's house there are many dwelling places..."

Indeed. The vision of a place where there is room for everyone—where all sorts and conditions of people come to dwell eternally with Jesus—that would be Joe's idea of heaven.

Joe enjoyed life here--to the very fullest. He brought life, laughter and God's love wherever he went. In the last few months he clung to life to remain with his beloved Betty. Still, he knew that his true home was the heart of God. He knew that God's love in Christ, which was the wellspring of his being, of his ministry, would also be his final destination.

He expressed that deeply comforting knowledge in a story he told in his own funeral homilies. It's about two ladies who were next door neighbors—by the name of Sally and Bertha. Sally was devoted to Bertha, who was several years her elder. Christian women both, they shared stories of their faith; that strengthened their bond. As Bertha developed a chronic illness, Sally kept closer tabs on her, visiting more regularly, helping out as she could and praying with her. In her decline, Bertha ended up going in and out of the hospital. With each return, she would call Sally cheerfully and say "I'm home!" At Bertha's death, Sally grieved her lost friend. Coming into the house after the funeral, Sally saw the flashing red light on her phone, and realized that there was a message. Tears came to her eyes as she heard Bertha's joyful voice sound once more, "I'm home, Sally", she said, "I'm home."

"I'm home!" Dear ones, Joe Di Paola knew that that would be the end of his story. And, by God's grace, it will be the end of yours and mine as well.

Amen, and amen—and let the people say "Amen"!