

I know you all tend to think that my whole sports thing is a little crazy. I'm well aware that my allegiances are a bit over the top, my passion coming out for them in ways that deeply lives into the origin of the term "fan" meaning fanatic. There are any number of reasons why my heart, my mind gets so worked up about sports, these things which at the end of the day are games, games with I realize little significance, beyond entertainment, where too much money is spent, and in our current world, Covid protocols are broken for the sake of celebration. However, one of the main reasons for that passion for me, one of the reasons why it nestles deep into my bones and refuses to let go is...my grandpa.

I usually say that I get my sports stuff from my dad, but the reality is, I got it from him, because he got it from my grandpa. It was a near guarantee that whenever we went over to visit, my grandma would answer the door and then say, "Grandpa's in the basement, I'll go get him." And she would holler down the stairs, "Erwin (the use of his real name, which drove him crazy), the girls are here!" And up he would come, switching off whatever game was on, usually the Tigers to come up and spend time with us. It was knit into who he was, Tigers baseball, Michigan football, the Lions, even though they drove him crazy, which is standard issue for Lions fans. That man could give you a rant about sports frustration that I can only

hope to one day aspire to. He was passionate and fiery about it, particularly the Tigers, which is what made the last game I went to with him so hard.

For his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Jenn and I got him tickets right behind home plate. I'd never sat that close to a baseball game before, and we both felt the excitement that we got to share that with him. The Tigers didn't disappoint. I mean they did...as they do...going down early and struggling hard, but man, they love a comeback. Plays at the plate in late innings, go ahead runs scored by just an inch of space. It was amazing...one of the most exciting games I'd ever been to. And yet...my grandpa spent most of those late innings up and out of his seat, away from the stands, away from the game. It took us a really long time to figure out why, to finally let ourselves admit why that was the case. He didn't want to watch anymore because he couldn't follow it anymore. His memory loss was just starting and being able to track the ins and outs of baseball were one of the first things that went, to me one of the cruelest turns of his dementia.

At his funeral, our pastor made a comment about how he was probably in heaven ranting and raving about the latest moves that Dave Dombrowski, the then Tigers GM, was making right before the season started. It made me laugh...and then...and then it hit me. He could do that again. His mind would be clear enough, focused enough to be able to do

that now. In the midst of the infinite and numbing grief of that moment, I had the realization that he got to be himself again. Everything that had been taken away, piece by piece for so long would have been returned to him. For the first time in years, my grandpa got to fully know who he was again, and live into that reality, even if that reality was a part of eternal life.

It's kind of the twist, the push and pull of days like today. Days which are this odd mix of hope and grief. We all gather in this place and our hearts are just a bit heavier than they usually are, because we know we don't gather alone. Each of us brings with us people, memories, stories that are simultaneously hard to remember and yet bring their own sense of lingering joy. We each feel some pull of grief still, whether large or small, for those who have gone before us into the company of the saints, and yet that pull comes with the reminder that we celebrate them today, and the promises they have received in Christ. The promise of resurrection, the promise of hope, the promise of eternal life and light perpetual. It's a strange tension to live in...we mourn and yet we hope. Sadness tinged with contentment. And trying to figure out where our faith, our still ongoing journey fits into this narrative of the saints, of their lives, of their faith.

I think that the crux of it lies in our second lesson, because within it lies the heart and soul of what we trust, what we hope for, what comes to full

fruition for our beloved saints, and what holds true for us even now.

Beloved, we are God's children now. God's children, that is who we are, that is who will always be, that is the core and center of our identity, yesterday, today, on into the future, on into eternity. That is who we are, that is who the saints are: God's children. That is who God has claimed us as, called us as, and knows us to be, always. There is not a single day that goes by in which that is not how we are known.

And yet...for those of us here...that's the difficulty isn't it? Because while God sees us that way...far too often, we don't see ourselves that way, the world doesn't always see us that way, and we don't always see each other that way. We get so twisted up and tangled in our identity, in how the world defines us, how others define us, how we define ourselves that we can't see straight through to the heart of who we are. We want to trust so ardently that we are beloved children of God, and yet there's always that lingering fear...what if I'm not good enough, what if I'm not worth it, what if God actually sees me the way that I see myself, what if the world's definition of who I am is the real me? Suddenly, all those questions make the reality that we are God's children really, really hard to hold on to.

And this is where, we find comfort and hope for our beloved saints, because as much as we miss them, as much as we ache for them, as much as

our grief and our pain is still so real, there is the promise that shines through this text that in God, they are fully known. All of those things that twisted and tangled them up in this life have melted away, all those things that left them feeling broken and confused have been restored to wholeness. In God, they are fully and completely themselves once again, and not only does God know them but they know themselves, deeply, truly, and completely. None of those questions linger. None of those doubts remain. There is nothing but the honest and hopeful truth that they are God's children, complete, whole, beloved beyond measure. That is the reality that they rest in complete love, able to be who exactly who they were created to be.

I'm sure for all of us, there are things about our loved ones that we always wished we could get through their heads about how we saw them, how we loved them, and it just never sunk in, because that's just how our brain operate. They know those things now. How we saw them is how they are able to see themselves in the light of the resurrection. And it doesn't take away the pain or the grief, but it does give us that one small moment to smile and breathe a little easier with the assurance that at least they know how ardently they are loved. All those things they had lost, all those things that never got through to them, those things are restored and those things are fully and entirely known.

Yet, what does that mean for us? For those of us still here, caught in between these moments of knowing and trusting how God sees us and when we just can't quite comprehend that. Because it is one thing to cling to the promise that someday we will know that and know that fully, trusting it with our whole beings. That we will see ourselves as God sees us. But what do we do in the here and now? On those days when we feel like we don't know ourselves, or on those days when we can't imagine that God sees us as beloved? How do we trust that these promises that God gives us, that we are God's children, that we are fully seen and fully known and fully loved don't just apply to life in eternity, but apply to life here and now, the beautiful, full life that we've been given to live?

Here's how I've been thinking about it this week, thanks to a little help from the Bible study folks, as per usual. I want you to imagine asking your parents to describe you. For real, asking your parents to describe who you are. Our gut instinct is to going to imagine those answers coming with a heavy dose of well, you were a bit frustrating, you gave me a run for my money, you are a handful, the list could go on and on, of all those things we think they'd say. When the reality is...what they would probably say is this: you are the greatest thing I've ever done. You are my best job and my joy and I'm so glad I created you.

The same holds for God. God how would you describe me? And our laundry list would begin...all the ways we think God sees us, all the ways we see ourselves, all the missteps and mistakes and faults. When the reality is, God looks at us and is like, you...are the best thing I've ever done. You're perfect. I know you're a little wonky around the edges, but you're perfect. I'm so glad I created you. I see you...exactly as you are, *exactly* as you are. I know you...probably better than you know yourself, and in all of that knowing the only conclusion I can come up with is I love you so much.

I think about my Grandpa getting that moment. That moment of clarity, of having baseball returned to him, and of realizing that all the things we all believed about him and knew about him, that he was just about the greatest man on earth, were true. That none of the self-deprecating, sarcastic asides that he would throw out about himself were true, but that the truth was simply that he was, he is, so amazingly loved. All of our saints get that moment. Over and over again. We will get that moment too. However, that moment, that promise is also here in the present, right here for the taking. Because it isn't just true in eternity, it's true right now. Right this very second. You are beloved. You are a child of God. You are seen and known and cherished and you are the greatest thing God has done. It's as true for your loved ones as it is for you, the question is, will we believe it? **AMEN!!!**