

Homily, Memorial Mass for Dick Bechelli
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It is not death that brings us together this morning, but life. Specifically, the life of Dick Bechelli, who in some way touched each one of us. The sadness that we – his children, brother, wife, grandchildren, nephews and friends – feel today is complemented by a sense of gratitude for this generous and gracious life that made room for us and countless others of every shape, size, color and orientation. At this Eucharist, we give thanks to God for Dick Bechelli. When we thank God for giving us Dick to know and to love, we are, in fact, thanking God for revealing something of himself, yet again, in one who “took flesh and dwelt among us” for seventy-eight years.

Our faith teaches us that only in Jesus do we see the glory and goodness of God perfectly reflected in a human face. That same faith also tells us that in the goodness of every human being, there is another, if different, revelation of God – incomplete, flawed but nevertheless truly revealing something about the God of Jesus, who created and sustains us all. So we look to Dick’s life, not to enlarge or idealize him in death beyond what he was in life, but to learn something about God and how God’s grace works through our very human nature.

Several years ago I was invited to throw the first pitch at a USF baseball game. Dick persuaded me, against my better judgment based on a long history of failure in a wide variety of athletic venues, that he could teach me to do that which I had never done. After a Sunday brunch, he took me out to the Loyola House garden, gave me an old glove and had me repeatedly throw him the ball as he moved further and further away. By the time we finished, I was able to throw the ball, albeit at a miraculously slow speed, into his mitt. He then showed me how to touch my cap, examine the ball and eye the catcher before I threw. The big day came, I got all the gestures right – I could see Dick smiling proudly in the stands – and proceeded to throw the ball into the dirt, a good six feet in front of the catcher. Dick subsequently and enthusiastically welcomed me back into the stands and told me how great it was to have me on the mound. I risked near-certain failure because I allowed myself to be carried away by Dick’s infectious, positive enthusiasm. That was a good thing. The God of Jesus asks us to risk living the Gospel without fear of the consequences. God asks only that we try, not that we succeed. We are called by God to build up one another and never to tear each other down.

Barbara and I chose this morning’s Gospel with Dick in mind. Dick, like Zacchaeus, was short of stature and worked his way through many a crowd to get closer to the action. Like Zacchaeus, Dick was not content to remain at the edges. We see something of Dick in Zacchaeus’ spontaneously generous response to Jesus. How many of us experienced Dick’s hospitality and engaging personality over a meal at 3535 Webster or a local restaurant? Dick would understand why Jesus asked us to remember him by gathering around the table and sharing a simple meal of bread and wine. Dick was not one to stand on dignity or cling to status; by the time you left the restaurant, he knew where the parking lot attendant went to high school, the waiter’s favorite baseball team and the name of the maître d’s oldest kid. Dick went out of his way to connect with people and left them feeling better for having known him. Our God did not remain exalted in the majestic heavenly heights but came down to be with us in the person of

Jesus. God asks that we get off our various high horses and care for one another, not just for ourselves.

In the week before Dick died, I was visiting with him and Barbara at home. Dick was quite diminished by that time, propped up with pillows in a large, comfortable chair. He wanted to talk about USF, particularly the men's and women's basketball teams, was delighted to learn that women's cross country won the league, excited by my description of Memorial Gym's facelift, insisting he was going to get over to see it come hell or high water. I was careful not to overstay my time, but Dick insisted that I stay and share a Guinness with him. It was a wonderful visit, filled with the warmth, humor and energy that defined him. Not until I was walking down the stairs with Barbara on my way out did I learn that Dick was in excruciating pain, principally from his leg. Not a word about this from him; not a whiff of self-pity or narcissism in Dick. Even in pain, he was not about himself, but about the people and institutions that he loved and supported so generously, and USF was chief among them. He really loved USF, where he was catcher on the baseball team, cheerleader and a thoroughly engaged trustee for the past nine years. Last week – ten days after Dick's death – I wrote a "thank you" note to Barbara for generous contributions from Dick and her to support the Lo Schiavo Center for Science and Innovation, Memorial Gym and the School of Management Dean's Circle. It must have been among the last things he attended to. Dick took care of USF when most of us would have been obsessing about our health. Dick exemplified that most Ignatian, nuts and bolt principle: "love expresses itself in deeds far more than words." In his final pain-filled hours, Jesus' concern was for his mother, whom he entrusted to the care of his favorite disciple. When we are able to put the needs and hopes of others ahead our own, we are not far from the reign of God. Dick was very close, as we can be as well.

If I could back-track for just a moment to the "words versus deeds" issue. I think we can frankly acknowledge that when offered a microphone, Dick was never wanting for words. I hope that he has finally forgiven me and is at peace with my decision to end his reign as the emcee of our annual alumni gala. This year, he and I had an ongoing disagreement over whether or not he would be able to speak "for two minutes" at his final Trustee meeting this June. I told him that he could not possibly relinquish a microphone in two minutes and therefore, no speech. When Dick and Barbara renewed their marriage vows just over six weeks ago in the Loyola House chapel, Dick interrupted the ceremony towards the very end to offer remarks that he said he would not be permitted to give in June. His words were warm, touching, humorous and, above all else, evidenced his stronger-than-ever love for Barbara. You know that marriage fulfills its sacramental intent when the love between two spouses mirrors God's love for his people. Marriage becomes truly sacramental when the two married persons are so closely joined together that their union is a sign of God's union with us in the person of Jesus, such that as St. Paul tells us "nothing can ever separate us from the love of God." Dick's and Barbara's marriage shows us that we can be faithful to the promises we make to one another, that love may prevail among us and that such love is the surest sign of God's abiding presence in our human condition.

This celebration of the life of Richard Bechelli is, at a deeper level, a celebration of the power of God's grace, and a word to us all about how to be truly human – about how to weave into the fabric of our own lives that which is "of God." This morning we celebrate our faith in

the God who raised up Jesus from suffering and death to a resplendent and eternal life beyond all telling. In this faith context, death is not simply a release from pain – it is that – but, more significantly, it is the peaceful and gentle passage into the hands of the welcoming Christ, who knows from his own personal experience what it is to suffer and die and rise to new life with God forever.

May we continue our own life's journey more sure of ourselves and of where we are ultimately headed because of Richard Bechelli; but most assuredly because of Jesus, for we firmly believe with St. Paul, "That as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too will live a new life with him forever."