

Where Have All The Flowers Gone

Lately I have found myself in attendance of more funerals than usual. But the thing that strikes me is that so many have been for people far too young or healthy to be checking out. Dying in one's sixties was once common, but life expectancy has now risen to nearly 80. Still it just seems to me we are losing far too many great people.

The title I've chosen for this piece comes from a protest song from back in the 60's, and that song really hit home when it was reported that Jerry Ellingson had been killed in Vietnam. Jerry was a fine young athlete I had in my English classes at Walcott High School my first year out teaching. He had one of the prettiest hook shots you ever saw, in fact, I taught him some of the finer aspects of the hook, a shot I imported from Oregon State where the hook was all the rage back in 1956.

Jerry was one of the cheeriest, most peace-loving young guys around. And to think that he was sacrificed to that stupid damnable war really opened me up to protest songs and pondering the unfairness of death in general. I even had the secret wish that he'd gone to Canada, at least he might have still been alive. The flowering of his life was cut off way too soon.

John Donne's famous sonnet, "Death be not Proud" pointed out that "Soonest, our best men with thee (*death*), do go/ Rest of their bones and soul's deliverer..." He adds in the end that "Death, thou shalt die." referring to Christ's victory over it. But that thought brings little comfort to those losing a loved one way too soon.

Just lately I went to the celebration and memorial of Tommy Richels, an 8th grader I had the pleasure of coaching in basketball back when I was a student at Science in 1958. Later he was a member of one of my English classes at Science.

He went on to a great career in civil engineering. In apparent great health and busy outfitting his new pontoon boat for a fishing trip to Canada, he was stricken and in a moment he was gone. I saw him often when I fished the area dams in early spring. He was there assessing flood potential, and of course fishing a little too. In fact he had lately offered to take me along on some of those outings, knowing I was quite gimped up from recent surgeries and advancing old age.

One of the proverbs of Solomon advises us to live for today because none of us can be sure we will be around tomorrow. That's a sobering thought.

I might also mention the loss of my nephew, Eric Gulbranson, past athletic director at the Oklahoma State Prison. He was taken out, not by a convict, but a drunk driver, from one of the most dangerous jobs around. Yet Eric was a serious and devout Christian who perhaps let down his guard at the wrong time. Who knows?

But Solomon, perhaps, goes farthest in wrestling with the enigma of death: "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecc 9: 7-11)

Time is one of death's surest facilitators: Auden wrote that "Time "breaks the threaded dances and the diver's brilliant bow./ Time that is "impartial in a week to a beautiful physique." (As I Walked Out One Morning.)"

So clearly death's impartiality has puzzled even the wisest of men. His conclusion to the matter almost seems fatalistic. He gives us the advice of "the preacher" in "Ecclesiastes": "Eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God now accepts your work. Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vanity."

Of course Solomon lived long before Jesus came with his promise of the Kingdom of Heaven. Solomon's phrase "under the sun" refers to life on planet Earth, where one must work to make the best of it in a world without a savior.

But, when Jesus came, He opened the door to the good news of the gospel of grace, a free banquet offered to us all, and for which He picks up the check by sacrificing himself on Calvary, enduring the punishment awaiting sinful men toiling "under the sun."

Many think that that news is too good to be true, but I choose to eat the bread and drink the wine Jesus serves up: "this bread is my body, broken for you; take and eat in remembrance of me." And taking the cup he said, 'this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness and remission of sin. As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show the lord's death, till he comes.'" (I Cor. 11: 23-26.)

Even so; come Lord Jesus,

Gene Pinkney for The Daily News 23-06-06-