

Words matter. Words matter even when they don't appear to change anything. Because some words change everything. Words like "I'm sorry," or "I forgive you," or "I love you."

Sometimes, words take time to sink in. Words like "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases" or "Be still and know that I am God" or "nothing can separate us from the love of God." These words can soothe, but they take time to make a difference.

And what John's Jesus says to the crowds gathered at Capernaum takes not just time, but a great deal of trust if his words are to ripen and change our lives. "I will raise them up on the last day" is not always immediately soothing, but that is the promise that we turn to in times of grief – the promise that we lean into because whether we understand it or not, *that* promise changes everything. Because of this promise, our grief – no matter how deep – can be a hopeful grief.

As an actor, Mary Katherine could tell you that most often it's what lies beyond or beneath the spoken words that truly matter. That's how the best theater scripts work. And that's often how scripture works.

The impulse to say something comforting to a grieving family is understandable. We look for ways to support and let them know that we love them. And what John's Jesus says gives us the best pattern to follow. Instead of trying to cheer each other up, we offer love by just *being* with each other and with this grieving family exactly *where* they are and *as* they are.

Just as Christ will never leave our side, we can just be present to the real pain and loss and grief that Mary Katherine's death has left behind. Her family and the rest of us are going to have to re-learn this new world that we are in.

We say things to each other in our grief like, "Time heals all wounds." That's not wrong, but people who live with the death of a loved one comes to know a deeper truth. They know that some healing means the pain goes away. And some healing means becoming whole as the pain slowly becomes a part of who we are.

When someone we love dies, some of us say something like "God must have had a plan" or "God called her home." That's also not wrong. But

it is *never* God's plan to inflict sorrow and isolation on God's children. The God of our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith "does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." God's plan was for Mary Katherine to partner with Brent in nurturing, teaching and loving William and Olivia, and for her and Brent to joyfully grow old with each other. *That* was the plan and the home that God had in mind for Mary Katherine.

Now in her eternal home, she smiles at the face of Christ, who will never let her go. And someday, we too will be gathered with her and finally understand what it means to be raised. But death interrupted God's plan and so today God is in this sanctuary, heart-broken and weeping right along with the rest of us.

When someone we love dies, some of us say something like, "God needed her in heaven." That's not wrong. But there are reasons that we pray that God's will be done "*on earth* as it is in heaven." God needed her *here* as part of God's answer to that prayer. Mary Katherine's son William got this one absolutely right: "I know she is taken care of very well in heaven," he wrote, "but I wanted her here to take care of me." That's what God wanted too, William.

Or we will say "God must have had something to teach" when people die. That is solidly true. But don't look for the lesson in Mary Katherine's death. Look to her life. Mary Katherine walked with grace, strength and faith through hard times. Mary Katherine had cancer, but it never, *ever*, had her. She didn't battle cancer, she never even gave it a fighting chance.

God did not send cancer to her, but when it came, God filled Mary Katherine with life and light and grace. God walked with her and so surrounded her with Divine light that she remained fully alive, fully human and fully available to the people that she loved. Her daughter Olivia got this lesson perfectly: "She was a bright star and lit me up," Olivia wrote about her mom. "But when she died, everything went dark, my dad and brother agree. So now I am trying to light them up. I want to be just like her!"

That's exactly what God wants to teach us, Olivia. To live while we are alive, to live life with so much love and joy that it spills out of us. That's what it means to be children of God living in the love of Christ that will never leave us. And when death changes our world, as it will, we can try to hide from it or talk it away, but that is only hiding from reality or talking God away.

This is a new world we are living in and we are different people living in it. When we regain some of our strength, we can allow ourselves to walk toward grief, not away from it. When we are ready to wipe our own eyes, we can witness the grief of this family and be present to them with our defenses down and our arms open; tangible evidence that their grief will not isolate them from us.

In our Gospel reading, John's Jesus offers his simple presence and a gentle touch along with an astonishing promise. Letting that grace be behind and beyond everything we say, even in our grief, we can follow Christ's example and allow God to deepen and fill us. And that's how, in this new reality and in the world to come, nothing – *nothing* – will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus who will raise us *together* on the last day.