

GOOD BREAD—BLESSED AND BROKEN

On the wall in my brother Philip's office are some pictures of men in uniform. One of a GI in full gear with his encampment in the background and him in the foreground on one knee praying the rosary. One of soldiers receiving communion at their encampment. Another of a Medal of Honor recipient who rescued soldiers who were under withering fire and was himself wounded several times. The fourth picture is of a young Marine 20 years old. He looks young and thin and very resolute looking at a map, dressed in full combat gear. His name was Paul Vincent McHenry and the picture is of him in Viet Nam. We were the same age. Both born in 1947. We were first cousins. He wanted to be a Marine; I a priest. I had already entered the seminary. He went two years to college because his father and mother asked him to. But then he joined the Marines because he felt that was his calling. He never made it home. And what's more he knew that he wasn't coming home. He told his parents that before he shipped out. He wanted them to know that this was what he wanted to do with his life.

As it turns out and as we learned much later on, he died on the very same day that my older brother, Michael was getting married up in Massachusetts. Paul's parents my Aunt Kay and Uncle John were present for the wedding but they both felt out of sorts that day. Little did they know what was happening half way around the world. They never really recovered from his death. In our family he is a hero. "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life...." He is buried in the National Cemetery in Gettysburg.

Memorial Day weekend and the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. The two seem naturally to go together. Jesus says to his apostles at the Last Supper: "Do this in memory of me." In memory. As a country we remember those whose blood was shed that we might live and live in freedom. As Catholics we remember the One whose blood was shed that we might truly live and live in genuine freedom all the days of our lives. In each case there is a body that has been broken. In each case there is blood that has been poured out. It should not have to be like this but in this world the broken body and spilt blood are still all too commonplace.

On Thursday I offered Mass at Ambler Extended Care for about 35 or 40 Catholics who live there. Looking out at them I see the walking wounded. Wounded not from battle but from life and illness. Some are in wheel chairs or on walkers. Some are with it mentally and others not. Some drift off to sleep during Mass. But then it comes time for the consecration and I hold the consecrated host high for all to see and in that moment we are all the same. We are actually united in our brokenness. That is what I saw there—and see here—when I lead you in prayer. We are the broken ones of today. I don't know very many people except perhaps the young who aren't somewhat broken or whose heart has not been broken.

When I hold up the large host at the Lamb of God and I break it in half and then in half again, it is because we need to be reminded that He was broken on the cross for us. His bones were not broken. His Spirit was not broken. But his heart was broken. His body was broken. And his blood was poured out. He put himself in that position. He was scarred by all of that. He made the choice to lay down his life just like my cousin did when it was his turn. But here's the thing. You do too. And I do too. We lay down our lives—in myriad ways every day, all year long. We lay down our lives in service to our families, our children, our parents, our sisters and brothers.

We lay down our lives in the parish, in this community, in our places of work, for our neighbors. And we too are scarred by living this way, by these events. We don't count the cost. We just do it. It is right and just, as we say at the preface of each Mass. Right and just.

But what underlies this laying down of one's life, this making of sacrifices big and small, this willingness to allow ourselves to be scarred by such experiences? It is love that animates us. Same for Christ. Same for my cousin. Same for all those who died serving their country. There is something about this willingness and this sacrifice that is truly noble. And it touches us. It touches us powerfully. It moves us. It inspires us and moves us to reverence and deep appreciation for this thing called human life. It also changes us. It also nourishes us at some level beyond our consciousness. WE might not always realize it or we might not be able to put it into words so easily but we recognize how good this kind of love is, how necessary it is and also how common it is.

This love is truly transformative. It is this love that can change the simple bread and pure wine that we will soon place on the altar into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. I have been empowered to accomplish in Jesus' name and your faith enables me to use that power to change the substance of ordinary bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is a miracle! But a miracle that we witness so often that we sometimes forget just how miraculous it is. My friends, the very One whose body was broken for us on the cross two thousand years ago and whose blood dripped slowly to the earth as he hung upon the cross, that One who is risen from the grave and has ascended to his Father. That very One is here. Right here in our midst.

As truly and as powerfully as he was all those years ago. And you believe it—or you wouldn't be here. But you are here and you bid him to come to you. We ask him to feed us with his love. And we get a taste—perhaps that is all we need in this life, a taste, a small wafer of bread but one that has been transformed in our hearing. Nothing looks different but everything is different. Jesus has become bread for us. And you can't eat bread or be nourished by it unless you break it. He got that. We get that. And so we gather. And we remember. And we make sacrifices ourselves. And we get broken down by life. But we get up and we allow him to strengthen us again and to help us bear our scars so that when we stand before him at the end and he asks to see our scars, scars that we encountered because we cared enough to love, we will be able to show him from our brokenness. And then He will say, "Well done my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" "For you saw me hungry and fed me, naked and you clothed, me ill and you comforted me, in prisoned and you liberated me. I tell you that as often as you did it for one of these least ones, you did it for me." Yes. For him.