

Funeral Homily
Lee Doss
April 22, 2017

So We Do Not Lose Heart

So we do not lose heart—so we do not lose heart. Those words have been an admonition to me this week, as I have been trying to find right and helpful words this day to honor the incomparable Lee Doss. Words that speak both truth and comfort—if that is even possible. Words that describe a lucky man who was by nature a most loving person, and who was also deeply loved—by his wife, his daughters, his siblings, parents, cousins and friends; it is a rare and precious thing in this world to live in such bonds of love. And how to find words that do justice for an unlucky man who lived for the past few years with so much loss, with so much grace? Sometimes there are not words enough so we do not lose heart. Looking for the right words has kept in my mind an image of Lee, searching for the words to say what he wanted to, sometimes trying and succeeding, sometimes trying and just letting the thought go with a big sigh and a crooked smile.

So it is good that we gather here in the Lord's house to say our prayers, using words of praise and thanksgiving and lament and comfort that have been spoken for thousands of years. It is good that we bend our

ear to the Good Book and to timeless hymns for words that will speak for us today—words of faith and protection and hope and transformation—that will carry us through this day and this season of grief, so we do not lose heart.

I did not know Lee Doss before he was sick, though I wish I had. His story as told by his family is one of a happy, hardworking and faithful person, even as a child, though he had his share of impishness in him, as illustrated in the story of the time Lee put a souvenir wooden snake bought for him on a family trip into his grandmother's suitcase. It must have looked pretty real because they say she took it outside and chopped up the whole lot into little pieces.

Lee grew up on a farm and learned to care for the land and its peanuts, corn and soybeans, like so many local country boys did. Of course that meant learning how to use all kinds of large equipment and how to fix things: trucks and tractors, irrigation systems and God knows what else that makes farms work that is beyond the imagination of us city-born outsiders. Mostly Lee loved being outdoors—fishing or hunting or working if he had to—just to be out in the open and close to nature. He used to go

camping out on the Little River by himself before he was even 16. He told his family of a night when a storm came up as he walked through the woods. He saw an angel and thought that would be the last night of his life. Having just been on the Little River yesterday for the first time, I can tell you that its beauty and tranquility have such healing power that I would not have been surprised if angels had been resting in the cypress trees.

When Lee came of an age to seek his way in the world, he set out to fulfill his dream for a place out in the biggest open space there is—as far from an inland farm as possible—the middle of the ocean. He served in the United States Coast Guard for 8 years, working in every possible body of water that surrounds this huge country, warm or cold, doing everything from maintenance on buoys (so everyone on the seas could find their way), to search and rescue, to catching drug smugglers. He said the only time he got in trouble in the service was that time he helped throw some smugglers overboard—but that’s all I know about that story. He was proud of this service he loved, but when they tried to promote him to a desk job he was done, because that was not out in the open, and he came home eventually to work with his Daddy again, learning to operate and work on heavy equipment and trucks—you guessed it—another outside kind of job. Lee

went to ABAC and then to the University of Georgia, and kept on working right through school. It was at a job his cousin Amy recommended him for at UGA that Lee met Brenda—and I understand Amy kind of recommended that get-together, too, even though she warned her office that he was “kinda nerdy.” I guess it must have been just the “kinda nerdy” that worked for Brenda, because though their romance was not fast and furious—it was one that carried them to a Christmas morning proposal a few years later and a rich and deeply connected life together.

Funny, sweet and smart, are the words I have heard describe Lee Doss over and over. When he brought Brenda and Christine home to Tifton from Athens, they were blessed with Sydney not long after. Lee added rural postal carrier to his resume while working multiple other jobs and eventually became full time with the postal service. You might conclude that a rural postal carrier would be a perfect job for Lee Doss, and it was—he was friendly, and reliable, and mostly outside.

And then Lee’s life changed. He was known in his family—even as a child—to be the one to answer “fine” whenever asked how he or anyone else was, regardless of the truth. When relatives called to check on things and

Lee answered the phone, even if the house was burning down he would say “everything is fine!” It was a while after Lee started having symptoms that he was diagnosed with the brain cancer that would eventually take his life. When you are hardworking and optimistic and love life, you *are* fine, until you are not. Yet even after Lee’s surgery placed him on leave from work, he was looking for things to do to keep himself busy and useful—such as asking to weed the Culbreath’s garden. When I met Lee almost three years ago, it was at Honey Creek Campground on a parish retreat. He had already been through the surgery, radiation and chemotherapies, and was still walking unassisted and toting his stimulator wherever he went. He seemed to accept his circumstances with so much more ease than everyone around him, and was happy to be outdoors there—during the day or around the campfire at night. He was there with his whole self—fully present and participating—and the impairments he had acquired by that time were rendered a mere inconvenience, no more than we would think of a Velcro splint on a sprained wrist or ankle. It was as if the words of Lamentations were as imbedded into his brain as those electrodes: *The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.* From the first time I met Lee, there was a peace about Lee that he offered to other people—even if he

did not always feel it himself—and this was sustained for the rest of his life. It always astonished me; I never understood it, but I accepted it as gift.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is speaking about our mortality, but he is not using words that conjure our anxiety or reinforce our fear of suffering and death—making us groan with longing to be alive, and to have those we love alive and with us. When naming our earthly afflictions as slight, neither is he making light of the real suffering that comes with a withering of our imagined best image of ourselves, nor minimizing the impact of the erosion of our strength and control over our bodies, our minds and our destiny. What Paul is saying is that though illness and dying make us *feel* naked and lost, as beloved children of God we are *always whole*, no matter what our earthly tent comes to look like, or sound like. When we walk by faith, not by sight, we are whole.

The faith of Lee Doss was a palpable thing. Not a showy thing but a solid thing, that was offered generously to all those who cared for him so lovingly for so long. He could have become bitter and demanding, and who could have blamed him; yet he was gentle and grateful, and he said “thank you” a lot. Even as his body failed him slowly, bit by bit, Lee was whole,

and I saw it every time he took a humongous bite of a cheeseburger and smiled, every time he saw Sydney walk in the door from school, every time he worked that automatic bed to his position of liking, every time he was going out for a ride with his Dad, every time he listened intently to someone reading to him, every time Brenda leaned over to kiss him on the head, and every time he received communion or a blessing with a tear in his eye. Lee was whole and fully alive until he took his last breath, reminding so many of us what is important in life—not deadlines, appearance, competence, control, accomplishments or perfect health—but joy, patience, persistence, faith, compassion, gratitude, and wonder.

So we do not lose heart. The gospel of John reminds us that our Good Shepherd has already laid down his life for his sheep, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. No matter what we face, no matter how unlucky we are, Lee has shown us that the Shepherd will not let the wolf snatch and scatter us, if we walk by faith. Lee will be profoundly missed by those who will grieve his absence in their lives, but we know as sure as he saw that angel by the river, that Lee is now dwelling in a building from God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, clothed in all grace and healing and wholeness. Thanks be to God. AMEN