

So, a week ago, today, Sarah and I, along with my mom, made the trip down to the Granville High School Commencement on the campus of Denison University, just east of Columbus, as our niece, my mom's first grandchild graduated from high school. Now, as with many such high school-ending celebrations, *chaos* would describe the day quite mildly, to say the least. There are all these cars invading the far-too-small area, maximizing every inch of a potential parking space, while, also, trying to, somehow, strategically place yourself in a spot that would make for the easiest exit for even more chaos in a few hours. Secondly, it's, of course, always too hot to make the trek to the indoor facility, that even if the place does have air conditioning; it wasn't exactly built to withstand the thousands of people cramped together in all those folding chairs.

The other guarantee is that the principal is going to speak for far, far too long, as if he or she must take advantage of the opportunity in front of all the parents, family, students, alumni, the school board and more. The ranking leader of the high school must list every achievement of the class on the athletic field, the theater stage, the band competitions, not to mention the classroom. It's impossible to imagine that we, actually, get to the students

walking up to grab that diploma in their hands with the fiercest grip in their young lives. Nevertheless, we did reach that point in the ceremony.

At Granville, the senior class president holds the honor to name every single student to join the graduated ranks. Two hundred one of them were spoken by Evan Noth, and God only knows how many hours upon hours he had to practice through some of the not-so-mainstream first, middle and last names of the senior class roster. *He* deserved an additional award after that was all said and done.

Nevertheless, as we reached the end of that list, about to name the 195<sup>th</sup> graduate, to be precise, with plenty of pauses in between names because of screaming family and cowbells and other noise-makers (not that we didn't do the same thing, but minor detail); when Evan spoke the name, Louis Raymond Roy Wood, there was an eruption that put all the shouts before to absolute shame. It was a vocal outburst far greater than any thunderous cheer from the stands for football or on the basketball court. I couldn't see the young man walk across the stage: his whole class in front of us immediately rose to their feet, not to mention the rest of the crowd surrounding us. I could barely hear a woman from a row behind us, a few seats down say, "he should not be alive."

The story so goes, about Louis, that in September of 2016, he was in a car with two friends, heading off to soccer camp. It was the first time that his mother allowed him to ride with anyone else but his parents. The car went off the road, leaving Louis with a severe brain injury and his lungs punctured, as he was airlifted to Nationwide Children's Hospital, where medical personnel stood beside him compressing a bag for eight hours to keep him breathing. Soon enough, the doctors concluded they had to ease the pressure on his brain, and so he was placed in a medically-induced coma for a month. There was a reason why the woman behind us said, "he shouldn't be alive." Nevertheless, three months later, he was discharged from the hospital. Two-and-a-half years after that, he walked across the stage to grab hold with one hand his high school diploma with thousands shouting at the top of their lungs.

It immediately brought back to mind something the superintendent had said earlier in the ceremony: that when he asked his fellow school board members what the number one quality they hope to instill in these students, it wasn't *innovation* for an ever-changing global economy or some code-word for better standardized test scores. Instead, it was *empathy*, the ability to understand and share feelings of another person. Now, the school board's

conclusion could very well be slanted because of our current political, social, religious climate, where we believe we need to shout our thoughts and feelings in order to prove the other person wrong. But they had no idea how empathy was going to be brought to life when Louis Raymond Roy Wood walked right in front of them with a crowd captivated by his story, his tragedy, his feelings of fear and sorrow transformed into joy and a thrill to lift up thousands who never met him.

The Gospel reading is convoluted, to say the least: Jesus imploring, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” It simply serves as a reminder of just how close this God is in us, and how much this Risen Lord of ours is calling us into the same closeness with one another, so incredibly close that we will shout at the top of our lungs when a sister or brother in Christ succeeds. So incredibly close that we feel stake-in-the-heart pain when another suffers. So incredibly close that we fully realize we cannot get through this life alone. Louis needed the help of doctors and nurses, yes; but he also needed his family, his classmates, and once-opponents on the soccer field, who ended up raising tens of thousands of dollars to cover

medical and therapy expenses. They just couldn't help themselves, but be drawn into his story, his perseverance, his triumph.

And the church, drawn into God every time we gather, every time we commune, every time we minister to complete strangers, God draws us in to each other too, into the stranger, into better understanding another person's feelings, their story, what makes them who they are at that very moment. Along the way, we will mourn, we will shout, we will be grafted into the human story of imperfection, of tragedy, but ultimately into the divine reality that this God does not allow anyone to stay down, not even in death. The true triumph of Louis is not that he got his diploma. It's that he walked back to his seat with his classmates. It's that he walked out the door to take on the world that did its absolute best to convince him that he was done forever. Evidently, God had other Resurrection ideas. God has other ideas for all of us: that the transformational love may continue in each of us through all the fears and sorrows and complexities and frustrations, as well as the joy and triumphs throughout this life and into eternity. And for that Great News brought to life in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, for Louis, for all of us, we give thanks to God indeed! Amen.