

A few days ago, I made the trek down to the Columbus area for my uncle Joe's funeral: another name to add to the endless list of those taken far, far too soon from us because of the dreaded cancer that continues to envelop our humanity. Seventy-five years young, but before all this happened, he had enough captivating energy and relentless fascination with God and all of God's children that would have complete strangers convinced there was, indeed, a Holy Spirit flowing through this world, no matter how broken it may appear to the rest of us.

Now, I suppose all relationships amongst family are unique, including those of uncles to nephews. Some see each other all the time, some have different interests and lifestyles and just never connect, some, simply, don't care at all to put forth an effort to build anything worth remembering. But when it came to my younger years, and I got fascinated with United States Presidential history, because a guy named Ross Perot was running for president, and I instantly thought I must have been related to the Texas billionaire: I memorized the presidents in order, the years they served in office, when and where they were born and on and on. When most people heard about this elementary school obsessed hobby of mine, it was nothing

more than a cute thing for them to see me engrossed in history at such a young age. Joe was more than the bare minimum on anything, though. He was the first to make me realize there were real lives behind those names, actual human beings affected by those years of service. They were not just words and numbers from some history textbook: humanity, American and beyond, shaped for both better and worse in a way we may never be able to imagine.

I should, also, point out my uncle served in the Social Security Administration for forty-seven years. I understand that such an occupational revelation leads all of America to roll their eyes in frustration and disgust over all the red tape to fill the entire universe and wondering if it's all going to vanish by the time my generation reaches that respective age bracket. However, Joe could not stop at the bare minimum political punchline for his work. He made it his civic mission to know the stories behind the names on the computer screen, to know the life behind the numbers on the page.

It was made to known to us all the more at his funeral, when the pastor read hand-written letters dating back from the 1970s from a judge thanking him for taking the time to work with impoverished mentally differently-abled individuals to a woman extending her appreciation for him coming to the

hospital to work with her sister in filling out scores of federal forms. In a sense, it was his way of not only picking up his cross, but it was as if he felt called to help others pick up their cross, too; as if he was to be a living Simon of Cyrene in this life.

Joe's passion for such things didn't stop when he clocked out on the weekdays. He made time at his local congregation: helped with camps for developmentally different adults, took Communion to homebound members, volunteered at the local homeless shelter. He was just wired that way: he couldn't just pick up his cross; he had to pick up others along the way, as well.

One of the last conversations I had with my uncle was at his granddaughter's high school graduation party; and even as he was dealing with debilitating treatments and less and less physical stamina, he was, still, planning this next session with a men's group at the church. He was reading a letter by Martin Luther, which said, "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does." Again, Joe had looked over our Lutheran church fine print: that once you finish Confirmation, you no longer need to worry about quoting Martin Luther. You don't have to impress the pastor anymore. But, again, Joe wasn't satisfied with the bare minimum on the journey of faith,

because grace was anything but bare minimum when it comes to what God did and continues to do for us. My uncle felt like he not only had to let the men in that study know about it, but all of God's children he ever came across.

So, no, God does not need *us* to pick up our cross and try to save the world. Jesus already did that for us, but we pick up our crosses and others along the way, too, because our neighbors, those just as loved by God as the rest of us: they, too, need our help, whatever we can give in this life. The last time I saw my uncle was a couple weeks ago, when my immediate family got together to go down to see him, knowing quite well, it may just be the last time. He was at home on his couch, and as we gathered around him, as if it was just another family gathering, he had as big of a smile on his face, still laughing at memories past, and still with pride over what his church was doing for the community.

And yet, oddly enough, it felt as if the world had failed in helping Joe pick up his cross of pain and anguish. All the money we pour into cancer research, and we still couldn't do it for him. All the trips to the James Cancer Hospital at Ohio State, one of the leading institutions in the entire country,

and it still wasn't enough to save him. Nevertheless, in spite of all that, joy and laughter reigned supreme in the face of impending death. It may just be that that was a direct revelation of exactly what the Kingdom of God looks like, what grace looks like.

Yes, God hopes we not only pick up our own cross, whatever that may be, but, also, to be a Simon of Cyrene in helping others pick up their cross. But even if we can't, even if we don't have it in us anymore, even if we've given up all hope that there was even someone Who could love us enough to pick up the cross on a Calvary hillside for us; regardless, Jesus will still invite us into a gathering, into a room of other wonderers and doubters and topsy-turvy faith journeyers, and Jesus will still unleash a smile and laughter and even tears of joy as he embraces us with the ultimate holy-clenching grasp with the most blessed assurance that death will certainly not win over us. Except, Jesus does not go along with the bare minimum to wait around to do such grace in some distant heaven. It happens day after day after day, in the random Joe's of the world, who will never let us forget that Christ is Risen right here, right now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!