



I've presided over a few weddings over the years, with all different kinds of couples. Some who wanted a full-scale church version of it, and others not so much. With that, there was this one younger soon-to-be husband and wife, who wanted to get married at a park in the gazebo, because "Ron" had some rather...negative experiences with organized religion. Because back in his teenage years, he was in a four-wheeler accident that doctors were not so sure he would survive. And although he did manage to live in

spite of it, he endured significant injuries to his brain to the point that his social awareness and behavior were not quite to the same level anymore. He would say things without much of a filter, to put it mildly, and so that obviously did not sit well with some of the die-hard church-goers who expected near-perfect manners and maturity. It was yet another way the church made precious children of God to be outsiders, because they were not quite up to the standards of the insider club of God's "chosen ones"...or something.

And so, "Ron," understandably so, did not want the full-scale church version of a wedding, and his fiancé, "Stephanie," wanted that for him as well. He didn't want me to wear a clerical collar or a suit or a robe of any sort. He wanted the bare minimum churchy language. I know some pastors still nowadays would not go along with such desires of what seem to become more standard now with many young couples for their nuptials, but I like to think that God will more than manage to bless two people regardless of how many prayers we speak or what clothes we wear or wherever it's done. I like to think God is much, much more flexible than we tend to give God credit for throughout our lives. And so it made sense that "Ron" and "Stephanie" would exchange their own vows from the heart. They were...interesting, to say the least, no where near what the die-hard church-goers were used to, but the words were still full of love and passion and care for each another.

And although "Ron" did everything he could to avoid the churchiness of it all with their wedding, he was still dedicated with plenty of love and passion and care when his mother's church went to work. He would help take care of the grounds, spending hours on end on the lawnmower and blowing leaves and tending the garden. He would be out there for Easter egg hunts and fourth of July cookouts: setting up and taking down tables, cooking food, and on and on he went behind the scenes, as if he insisted on his own meaningful way of bringing God's never-ending love to life. However, he did so ultimately by always going out of his way to include those who would often be by themselves. He would go over and check in to see how they were doing, make a joke to give them a laugh, as if he didn't want anyone to feel as if they were an outsider in the true essence of *God's* love and passion and care, all of which was not determined by the die-hard church goers, but by Jesus Christ himself.

Unfortunately, it was this past week, that we received the news that “Ron,” eerily close to my age, had died. Not much details were given as to what happened exactly: just that he was in intensive care for a few days, and “Stephanie” had to make that absolutely unbearable decision that I cannot even begin to imagine: to remove her precious husband from life support. “Ron” was not going to survive whatever happened this time. And he was gone shortly thereafter.

It is in those absolutely unbearable moments that the 32nd Psalm we heard this morning is brought to life in a rather eerie way. Because such moments not only bring the understandable feelings of sadness and despair, but also the just-as-understandable feelings of anger and frustration and resentment, even against God. And hopefully this season of Lent gives us the needed and holy permission to have such reactions. Too often we are ingrained from our die-hard church-going-ness to not only wear our Sunday best in terms of attire, but also our Sunday best of feelings and attitudes. That we better leave any negative anything at home, and only come into the sanctuary with happiness and joy, because somehow we’re under the impression that’s what God will only allow. Except, hopefully this season of Lent gives us the needed and holy permission to bring in the anger and frustration and resentment, even against God. Because, yes, God is much, much more flexible than we often give God credit for throughout our lives.

Otherwise, the 32nd Psalm gets brought to fruition in a way that God does not desire for us: “While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long.” “Ron” brought to life the love and passion and care of God that many of us die-hard church-goers take for granted: not just the God who desires to include all of humanity, even the ones who don’t always say the right things; but “Ron” brought to life the God who invites us to bring in our Sunday and every day not-so-best, because the just-as-understandable feelings of anger and frustration and resentment are welcomed by this God of the cross, too. The cross of Jesus Christ who is more than willing to join us in bearing whatever we carry in this life, including the feelings we try to keep deep within us. As if no anger or frustration or resentment or even death itself will ever be able to separate “Ron” and all of us from the boundless love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!