

My favorite uncle and Godfather took his own life last Saturday. He was 95 years old and had just had enough – particularly given the fact that we unexpectedly had to bury his middle child last week. I was thinking about Uncle Dan when I started preparing this homily. His death, as compared to the death of Jesus, brought to mind the famous work from the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas entitled: *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*.

Thomas wrote this poem for his father, with whom he had a complicated relationship. The poet tells his father not to go into death quietly, but rather to fight against it with every fiber of his being. In the poem, Thomas says:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas' idea of death was very clear. It was to be avoided at all cost, until there was no more avoidance. To him, there were two ways to approach death — you could either quietly enter into it, with no more than a whimper, or you could rage against it and fight valiantly to the bitter end. And while I do not agree with him, that the fight to the end is the better choice, I agree with his assessment of the choice. Except when we talk about suicide, or when we talk about the death of Jesus on that Good Friday long ago.

You see, when Uncle Dan died, it was the result of a conscious choice to join his beloved wife, whom he desperately missed. When he made that fateful decision, it was because he could not imagine one more minute of suffering on this earth. Compare that with Jesus, who did not choose to be meek and mild as He died a horrible death. Nor did He choose to “rage against the dying of the light.” Instead, Jesus went from his sham trial, through the flogging and the public mocking, to the unimaginable pain and suffering of the crucifixion, all the while, choosing a third way of reacting. Jesus chose not to be completely stoic, nor to struggle and fight; He chose instead to *lead* His followers, even into death.

Jesus did not complain about the way that He had been treated, nor about the fact that He was never convicted of any real crime. Instead, He lived out the final act of this drama that Our Father had staged for our benefit, with the dignity that comes with faith. Faith that He was doing the will of that same Father in heaven.

Although Jesus lamented about being forsaken in those horrible hours; once He had cried out to the Father, asking why He was being left so alone, He seemed to receive that peace that comes with an understanding of God's will and faith in the power of the Spirit.

When He had the opportunity to look down and tell the onlookers, "Ha! Now you're really going to get it for what you've done to me!" Instead, He took that moment to cement the loving relationship between His mother and the Disciple whom He loved. Even His statement about being thirsty does not seem to be about anything other than completely fulfilling the prophecies about the Messiah.

Jesus knew that his mission on earth was — as He put it — "finished." He knew that He had done all in His power to gather the children of God, wherever and whenever He could, and to bring them the Good News that the Kingdom of God was near. He knew that He had healed, and fed, and released from captivity to sin, all those who had ears to hear His words, and eyes to see His miraculous signs.

But most important, Jesus knew as He hung there that afternoon, that He was carrying the sins of the whole world into death — as if the cross He carried through Jerusalem was made out of sin instead of wood. He knew that this one sacrifice — the ritualized killing of the only sinless human — would be sufficient to redeem every sinner, from the beginning of time through eternity.

Donna asked me what I believed God thought about Uncle Dan inviting – or demanding – death as he did. I believe that Jesus sat on the edge of the tub and cried as my uncle died. I believe that God was as sad for him, as Dan was sad. I believe that Jesus

showed him the way to the Father and my uncle just decided when he would take the journey. And I believe that the Jesus who suffered so horribly that Good Friday, understands when we cannot take the suffering anymore.

Jesus, the Son of God, went to His death, not as someone who had given up, nor as someone who raged against death because of fear or anguish. Jesus went to His death as one who had the ultimate confidence that He had run the race of life as well as He possibly could, and was now finishing His work in order to go back to Our Father and the heavenly banquet that would await His triumphal arrival. Just as He lived His life perfectly, Jesus worked through His death perfectly, so that we too might have confidence that death should not bring fear or rage, but rather the peace of God, which comes to all those who have lived with Christ and decide to die with Him.

In the name of the one who gave His life for ours, Amen.