

Homily delivered at the funeral Mass for Jayne Marie Swiderski Fischer, June 6, 2016, St. Paul's Catholic Church, Leesburg, Florida.

On behalf of Fr. Mark and the entire St. Paul Community I wish to express my sincere condolences to parents Joan and Joseph Swiderski, sisters Judy, Joy and Jacqueline; former husband Robert, sons Robert, Geoffrey, and Patrick all the nieces, nephews other family and friends on the death of Jayne Marie Fischer.

This community has responded with love and support for the family. Certainly the outpouring of prayers and attention makes the burden a little lighter for the family. On their behalf, I thank you for coming and sharing their sorrow. Today we express a deep concern for the immortal soul. Two questions may haunt our minds. The first question we ask ourselves is, "Where has my loved one gone?" Will God be forgiving and merciful? The Scriptures abound with unshakable proof that God is always forgiving and merciful, regardless of how or why we die. In such a crisis, strong sympathy springs up in the human soul. Sympathy is the basis of morality. We naturally grant an edge to someone caught in an untenable situation. And if **we** are so concerned and anxious about salvation, then the Savior Jesus Christ is a thousand times more concerned. God is not cruel. God is a compassionate Father, who desires the salvation of all.

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" God looks at the total life of every person, not just one instantaneous and irrational decision of the moment. Human nature is weak. Mistakes are made. There occurs at some time a loss of innocence and balance in everyone's life. God understands our confusion and depression and his saving power can redeem all actions.

The second question that plagues the minds of family and friends is, "What could I have done to prevent this?" If only I had looked and listened for the cries of help and distress, maybe things would be different. Guilt settles in to haunt the mind and flog the conscience. The poem "For Harry and Joan" by Maisha Jackson asks the same question:

And what about the "what-ifs?"
What if You hadn't done that, or you had done that
or I hadn't done that, or I had done this
or I/We hadn't/had done this or the other?
What about the "what-ifs"!

This is a difficult question to deal with and even more difficult to answer. Grief can be intensified by this nagging guilt, but then again, it IS unjustified. We are reminded in our reading from Corinthians:

Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Today there is a huge emptiness in our hearts because Jayne, whom we have known and loved, has been taken from us. It is cruel that she has been taken away from us in this way. Jayne was in the prime of her life and she was physically healthy. She still had so much to do and so much

to give to other people. We are tempted to say that if she had been elderly-and her death had not been so sudden and tragic-we could accept it. We would be sad, of course, but we could accept her death in such circumstances. It is any wonder, then, that we are devastated at this time. What are we to do? How are we to cope? Today, we need more than ever to listen attentively to the message of the word of God. Only our faith in God can sustain us and prevent us from remaining suspended in disbelief as we mourn Jayne's death and struggle to cope with our sense of loss. Only the word of God can offer us consolation and hope when we are confronted with the frailty and uncertainty of human life. The word of God, in addition to reassuring us about Jayne, has a relevant and compelling message for us, too-a message that, if we listen to it and act accordingly, will ensure that we will be ready for death whenever it comes, whether suddenly in tragic circumstances or slowly at the end of a terminal illness or in old age.

None of us knows when our life in this world will end. How many of us are ready for death at this moment? The only meaningful way to be ready for death is to prepare purposefully by loving God and all God's people in everything we do. So there is a definite lesson for us to learn during these sorrowful and lonely days. The lesson is to begin to learn not to be surprised by surprises, or the suddenness of the unexpected.

We may never know why this took place, but what we do know is that Jayne was greatly loved by many people; Jayne also loved them and a great many other people too, and somehow in her troubled heart Jayne believed that what she was doing was out of love for those in her life. This is very difficult for us to understand.

I would like to share something with you that I hope will make some sense to you. When I go to the school and we are talking about Lent and Easter one question almost always comes up: "Why is Good Friday called Good? How could the cruelty of the crucifixion ever be seen as good? In asking this question, the children are focusing in on one of the ageless mysteries of our Christian faith. Why did Jesus have to suffer on Calvary? Why could he not have climbed down from the cross triumphantly? Surely the Roman soldiers and the Centurion would have dropped to their knees in homage, and the people of Jerusalem, who only a few short hours earlier had demanded his death, would have rushed up the hill to worship him. The whole world would soon have known that certainly Jesus Christ was the Son of God.

But this did not happen. It did not happen because it was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things. The Scriptures for centuries had been foretelling this very truth. Necessary, not by some abstract truth or law of nature, but because this was the way God wanted it. This was the way God wanted it, and Jesus in free obedience accepted this charge from his Father. But it was precisely through this emptying of himself, through his acceptance of suffering and death, that he won victory over death.

But why? Why when surely there were other ways open to an all-powerful, all knowing God? Why a death so horrific that Jesus himself asked to be spared of it at the eleventh hour? The honest answer is that we really don't know. We get some clue from Jesus himself when he talks

of his suffering and death as being rooted in God's love for each of us: "*Greater love than this no man has, than he lay down his life for his friends*" (Is 15:13). Somehow, by rising from the dead and conquering suffering and pain, after he had fully entered into the darkness and despair which that very suffering and pain brought him, Jesus could powerfully identify and empathize with our struggle and our pain. And not only could he identify with our suffering and pain, but he could show us a way through it, a way to give it a purpose.

If Jesus had triumphantly climbed down from the cross and escaped all the human suffering that went with it, would he have anything to say to Jayne's heartbroken family and friends today? I think not. As it is, the only real source of hope and healing for this gathering this morning is that somehow our suffering and pain today is intimately linked with the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But just as our suffering and pain, and Jayne's suffering and death are linked to Christ, so too, His resurrection allows us that same hope. We will rise with him on the last day.

Life and death are mysterious and, therefore, full of surprises. Some of these surprises are remarkably rewarding and happy; others are disturbing in their sadness. We need to prepare for the unexpected. We will never be unprepared if we use properly the various opportunities and possibilities given to us in life. We need to celebrate life and live it fully while we have it. Then, if tragedy happens, indeed we will be shocked and stunned. But we will not remain suspended in disbelief for too long because, even in our grief, our Catholic faith will enable us to continue to live in hope until we meet God in death.

We are promised by Christ that he is going to make and place for us and return to take us to himself; as we pray today for Jayne and all the family, we remember that Jayne did not die, but was reborn into eternal life.

There's a poem by an anonymous author that goes like this:

Forgive me and forgive those that trespass against me.
Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am the thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumnal rain.

When you waken in the morning hush
I am the soft uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there.
I did not die.