

Homily / Eulogy – Trace Bulger Funeral Mass 10/29/2019

By Father Thomas Haan

I am confident that my assumption is accurate, that a good majority of all of us gathered here knew Trace well before the onset of that neurological disease. Some of you, you privileged ones, knew him all the way back to his toddler days, back when he was the “sword-man”, when he was wielding those homemade makeshift weapons, battling imaginary dragons and whatever opponents he could dream up. Maybe some of you remember him as a young, curious boy who had a passion for what seemed to be everything. Maybe you remember him here, at Our Lady of Grace, as a cross bearer, processing in and out of Mass, or helping with the living stations of the cross. Maybe you knew him through his fierce competitive days on the football field, and track and field – whether it was the legendary CYO football teams or the Guerin Catholic football teams or even the Wabash team. Maybe you remember him as a fraternity brother at Sigma Chi. Maybe you just remember him as the kindest and friendliest person I’ve ever met, or maybe you remember him as a doodler in class and the one who would draw, who would paint, who would write poetry, and stories in a journal? And Dan and Amy, you knew him as all of these things, but you knew him as your son, and you told me that when he was honored to go out to a leadership conference in Utah in college and they asked each individual participant to reflect on their own stories, he wrote down that his story began at Guerin Catholic because it was such a home to him... to flourish in his faith and his friendships. But even Trace knew that wasn’t the complete story, because, you know, the story began the day he was born, but more specifically, the day he was baptized.

When he was baptized, you made promises to God. To raise him in the faith, to keep Christ commandments, to love God and his neighbor. Well Done Well Done.

Shaelen and Maris you knew him and all these things, but you knew him as your big brother. Shaelen, he will always be your best friend, the one who you could talk to and encourage you. Maris he will always be your big buddy and you will be his little buddy.

It’s amazing when we list out all the different ways, we knew him in our various ways... and all the different passions and interests and activities he was involved with in his lifetime, it’s such a diversity; but there is unity to it all. And I think Trace can recognize it too. But we can now, in retrospect, recognize that he wasn’t just a curious young boy and student who would love to take difficult classes just for the challenge, it wasn’t just for knowledge, the guy was interested in truth. And he knew that the source of all truth was his God. God made flesh. Jesus Christ.

He wasn’t just kind for kindness’ sake. He wouldn’t just talk to strangers just for the heck of it, although he might have. He wasn’t just the friendliest person in the world to do so just for his own personality traits. It’s because he knew that he was made for goodness and love. And the source of all goodness and love is our God. God made flesh. Jesus Christ.

He wasn’t just interested in just doodling for doodling sake, although he might have. He painted. HE drew, HE sketched. HE wrote poetry because it was beautiful. But behind all of that beautiful stuff that he made, was the source of all beauty, which is our God. God made flesh. Jesus Christ.

And we get that affirmation in the gospel that they choose today. Jesus Christ says. "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus Christ was the narrative unity to the life of Trace.

My own interactions before the disease came were limited, but as you can imagine, memorable. My first was on the sidelines of the Guerin Catholic football stadium. I was not yet assigned the chaplain at the high school, and yet my own love for high school football led me to join the boys on Friday nights under the lights. And it was there that I would witness the likes of Evan Hansen and Trace Bulger and others who were fierce competitors. They were warriors out there. But not only that, I would also see those guys like Trace and Evan on the sidelines, pacing, building up their teammates, encouraging them. And then Trace would come alongside and have conversations with me. I don't remember the content; I just know it was not about football. It was about all the other things he was passionate about. I was struck by those moments.

My other memory was at the all-school Mass at Advent. At Guerin Catholic we have a large alumni Mass right before Christmas, when alumni are home from college. We have a breakfast afterwards, typically, and Trace attended. The guy loved his all-school Masses, and loved to serve the Lord at Mass. After breakfast he cornered me. He was excited, as you can imagine. He was dreaming up new possibilities of men's groups at Wabash College. He'd already talked with Father Shockley about these possibilities. He wanted to serve meals. He wanted speakers. He had big dreams. And he couldn't stop talking fast enough. But I could tell, as many of you remember, something wasn't quite right. He was slurring a little bit, and he was talking faster than ever, and I had to ask a couple of other teachers if that was the normal Trace that I knew. And we know that was the beginning.

And as we look back to that, and that time of decline and that confusion...some of us who knew him before the disease were tempted to say, "well, that's not the same old Trace". We want the old Trace back. "it's just not the same." And physically, that was true. But Dan and Amy and the rest of us knew while physically that was true, it was not a different Trace, it was the same Trace even amidst the disease. And to prove that reality, I want to share a story with you that Dan has shared, probably with many of you.

A year and a half ago, back when Trace could move from his room into the living room with help to join the family and maybe listen to the television...it was a time where he wanted to conserve his energy and often had his eyes closed unless necessary... Dan and Trace were channel surfing and they landed on EWTN, that Catholic cable television channel. And Mother Angelica Live was on. Mother Angelica was a sister... a religious sister who had founded the cable television channel and had a show of her own. She was a little old, she was blunt, and she was hilarious. She's worth listening to. And so they listened to what she had to say that day. And on television, she began to teach about redemptive suffering. And this is a reality in our Catholic faith that tells us that it's by not only Christ's death and resurrection, but his suffering, that he redeemed the world. He, Jesus Christ, took on the consequences of our sin in his pain and suffering. And that was redeeming of us all. And the mystery continues in the church, then when we suffer in our life, and we unite our suffering with the crucified Lord, and we suffer with him, our suffering becomes redemptive. And it's when Mother Angelica was teaching this lesson on television that day, that Trace moved, opened his eyes and looked at his dad intently, with knowing eyes. In some way telling Dan, that's what I am doing.

And that makes perfect sense, because this is the same Trace, the same one who cared for others and built others up on the football sidelines and made his sisters giggle. HE was still living for others, and still building them up by his own suffering. And yes, in a very different way than he was used to, but he still was. The same one who would bear the cross in and out of mass, was now bearing his cross; the one who would help with the living stations of the cross, was now living his own stations of the cross. The same one who was the warrior on the football field and during track and field competitions, was now a different type of warrior. And we are tempted to say he was battling the disease—and to some degree that was true – but we didn't even know the essence of the disease. He knew it was a greater battle, not just against the disease, but against pessimism, against hopelessness, against hate, against bitterness. I'll steal the words of Saint Paul here: our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities. The powers, the forces of darkness and wickedness. Trace in a very different way, wanted to battle evil and stand with and united with Christ. He would do so in a very compromised situation, and yet he would. That famous quote from Edmund Burke "all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" and never in his life did Trace do nothing.

And we are awakened to the reality that in every great story in the history of the world, and the story of every human being, that is the same story, the battle between good and evil, for Christ and against him. And once we recognize there is good and there is evil in the world, I have the obligation and duty to become a warrior myself. We don't know the exact moment that Trace made that realization, but he did, and he began to live it... and never in a million years did he realize how that would be lived out.

And I think that makes sense now, that whenever any of us had our interactions with Trace, we went away saying "boy, I got to be better, I want to be a better man." Because it awoke in our hearts that we know there is something greater than just living for ourselves. There's something greater, a greater thread in our life too. And that reality is our task. That the threads of Trace's life before and after the disease, that must be the thread of our lives as well. We cannot live, and our passion cannot be just for ourselves. It must be for the truth, goodness, and beauty of this world, which all come from Christ. We must begin to build other ups in our life, through our care, through our love, through our kindness. But even, if God calls us to, in our suffering, not to shun it, but unite it with Christ, to make it redemptive, to build up the body of Christ. We too, must become warriors, against the forces of terror and evil which work against goodness, truth, and beauty.

And we must admit that whenever our interactions with Trace happened, we would say mission accomplished for Trace. We did become better. How many hundreds and hundreds of rosaries did we pray? Not just Sunday nights at 8pm. How many times did we make meals or visits – not just to Trace and his family, but to his friends. We did become better, and I dare to hope today that Trace is not done. And there is a reason for our hope in this. Our hope is what differentiates our mourning from the rest of the world.

We are sad today. Very sad. We've lost a good one. But our sadness is tinged with a great hope. A hope that through Christ's death and resurrection, he has opened the gates of heaven. We have great hope because in the divine words of Jesus in his gospel, he says "in my fathers house there are many dwelling places." That's our hope. And we hope that in God's mercy and his goodness and infinite love, he would bring Trace to himself. And there in that moment, Trace would gaze into the face of his love, the source of that truth and goodness and beauty he pursued his whole life. And from that place, God willing, he

would not cease building us up. He would not stop being a warrior. We who were privileged to know him in this life, have great knowledge that he is building us up.

Our Task doesn't stop, nor hopefully does Trace's. Our task is to continue those rosaries and those prayers for him and his family; to continue to build them up in their grief. We will entrust our prayers, as we always have, into the hands of our Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Grace, Our Lady of Lourdes, the great mother to us all, who consoles us in our grief. Who is the source of our hope, because she stands at her son's side, interceding for us and interceding for Trace. Trace the lover. Trace the warrior.