

Salvador (Chuck) Gonzales

Chuck loved Antonia. When he lost her after 35 years of marriage, his life went off balance. The two of them enjoyed ordinary things together—gardening, listening to the radio, trips to Texas and Mexico, cleaning the house—just the plain old good things about life—all made special because the two had become one. Chuck was born on St. Valentine’s Day—almost a foreshadowing that his heart would beat for someone special some day. When Antonia took sick, Chuck cared for her with devotion beyond compare. In doing so, he offered his family and friends an example of setting priorities and acting upon them. Chuck loved his family—his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren, and, yes, his great-great-grandchildren. What a blessing that they could experience him and he could experience them. Just this week I observed the anniversary of the death of my own great-great-grandfather. He’s been gone 150 years; sadly, none of us ever got to know him. But Chuck will be remembered for generations to come. For the Gonzales family, this is a day to be grateful for Chuck’s life, but also a day to lament his death.

How fitting then that the family asked us to hear a passage from the Book of Lamentations as our first reading. It sustains in balance the seemingly incompatible feelings of grief and hope.

The Book of Lamentations commemorates one of the saddest moments in the Old Testament. The people of Israel, the people God chose to make his own, did not remain faithful to the covenant they made with the Lord. This covenant resembled that of marriage— where both partners give what they can to the other not to attain reciprocity but out of love. Ancient Israel didn’t follow through. In time, the people who were once so dear to the Lord surrendered to their enemies, witnessed the destruction of their city Jerusalem and its precious temple, and suffered the killing or deportation of their trusted family and friends. It was a horrible time. The Book of Lamentations bares the people’s soul.

The opening verses of today’s excerpt says it all: “My soul is deprived of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; I tell myself my future is lost, all that I hoped for from the LORD.... Remembering [my homeless poverty] over and over leaves my soul downcast within me.” You may have felt the same way when you lost someone or something you treasured. Chuck surely felt grief when he lost Antonia.

Thankfully, though, the Book of Lamentations does not end there. It continues, “But I will call this to mind, as my reason to have hope: The favors of the LORD are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent; They are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness.... It is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord.” Again, Chuck probably experienced that with the hibiscus and roses he tended in his garden. He continually witnessed new life, the beauty of color and the seduction of fragrance. He hoped in silence for the saving help of the Lord.

Gathered today in the presence of the Lord, we pray that he will shower his inexhaustible mercies upon our brother Chuck. May the Lord reveal to us in our times of sorrow well-established reasons to cling to the gift of hope.