

Nora, Betsy, Steve: This large room overflows with people who love and admire you, and hold you in their broken hearts.

Each of you is a remarkable and beautiful person, and together you are an exceptional family.

I remember marveling at Nora when she was in confirmation, so quiet and quick, deep, enigmatic, bright, thoughtful.

I have always marveled at Betsy, so sharp and yet so tender, champion of justice and right, carrying in such a petite frame an enormous mind and an even bigger heart.

I marvel now at Steve, delivering such a soaring and thoughtful eulogy for his son, the climax of months spent facing both media cameras and despair with such courageous and clear-eyed grace.

And what more, after so eloquent and truthful a tribute, can be said of the marvel and miracle that was Paul?

It is because of your magnetic excellence as people, all four of you, your warmth and wisdom and kindness and passion and gift for sharing life and joy so generously and indiscriminately and respectfully, that so many and diverse people are gathered around you today, while still more wish they were.

It all makes Paul's death so deeply, unbearably painful, and puzzling.

Why?

Why would he steal from you and from us all the unduplicated beauty of his life?

It is only one of so many haunting questions on which God, and Paul, are so maddeningly silent.

How could Paul not know how unthinkable, cruel and devastating his decision was?

How could he not realize how precious his life was, how valued, how celebrated?

How could a spirit so uniquely free, so utterly unbound by convention and the shackles of concern about what other people think, bind himself, even literally?

How could he fail either to know or to care that his knife and duct tape would cut open and constrict so many hearts, so many lives beyond his own?

What lurked so hidden and hideous in his mind and soul that prompted him to do this?

How could someone who so heroically treasured what so many of us so commonly undervalue--the earth, the faceless worker in the sweatshop, the stranger, the awkward and friendless, the refugee, the music that others dismissed as noise--how could he of all people so tragically undervalue his own amazing person?

You have scoured his notes and writings and books and dorm room for answers to these and so many other unanswerable questions, and you only find murky hints, you can see only as in a mirror, dimly.

You have dredged for answers which may or may not ever be uncovered, and will long continue to search for some way that this utter senselessness can make sense.

But even if you find it, even if and when you discover some a hidden explanation that satisfies the ravenous and relentless questions, it will not bring back Paul's smile.

It will not return the light to his warm, mischievous eyes.

He is lost.

He is also found.

*Why do you say, O Church, and speak, O community,*

*"My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?*

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*

*The LORD does not faint or grow weary; the LORD's understanding is unsearchable.*

*The Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words.*

*We see only as in a mirror, dimly, but... we hope in what we do not see.*

We hope in the invisible, unsearchable one who searches out and sees us.

*O Lord, sings the psalmist, you have searched me, and known me.*

*You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*What we would give to know Paul's path, to understand his lying down, to become acquainted with his enigmatic ways, of living and of dying.*

But God knows.

God sees, and God is with him.

Paul himself may not have seen this, but God's truth never depends on the dim recognition of human eyes.

Paul made his bed in Sheol, but could not flee from God.

Paul took the wings of the morning and settled at the farthest limits of the sea, and even there, God was present.

Paul chose to say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me become night," and still God saw.

I don't know why God allowed Paul to do this, but I am angry that God didn't prevent him.

I am also confident that Paul was unable to escape the long reach of God's love.

Faith, hope and love abide.

Right now, faith is shaky at best.

Hope is suspect after the hellish ordeal of the last few months.

But love is certain.

Even we with dim-mirror eyes and raw, numbed senses can see and feel it in this room.

It shines so clearly in the ravaged, beautiful faces of Paul's family.

And as Betsy told me this week, between sighs too deep for words, there is nothing stronger or deeper or more abiding than the love of a parent for a child.

And that is our faith, and our hope, because for everything else he was, Paul is first and forever a child of God.

This was proclaimed and celebrated in this room on September 20, 1987, when Paul was baptized by Pastor Steve Swanson.

God's water broke, and through her baptismal womb passed the wise-eyed miracle we honor and grieve today.

Christians then and now and always have encountered God at the bottom of the water, speaking of baptism as birth, and speaking of it also as death.

Water is the mysterious, dim passageway by which Christians are joined to God's Easter

miracle, centered in the stupid, senseless death and unsearchable resurrection of Jesus, where somehow, instead of life ending in death, death ends in life. Paul was watermarked with this promise, whether his own marvelous eyes recognized it or not.

He was no fan of organized religion.

He had little use for church, at least as we conventionally understand and experience it, and what would be more like him to buck convention, sacred or otherwise?

Endless lover of music, he resisted well the songs of the faithful in this balcony before he stopped coming altogether.

Nora tells of a conversation she had with Paul, who was insistent that he would return to Chicago because he loved it so much.

She asked him why; he told her it was because of the lake.

"But you never go," she said.

"I like that it's there," he said.

Whether Paul liked that our baptismal font was there, or whether Paul tried to flee from God's presence, God stayed with him.

And God spoke to him in alternative ways, most often musical and humorous, always unusual and fresh, and Paul listened.

Except when he didn't.

Paul somehow missed the critical, crucial message that his life was precious, cherished, and too beautiful to waste.

And Paul made a tragic and terrible mistake, and that is all of the story our tearful eyes get to see.

But the story continues, and if you look into the baptismal water, as if into a mirror dimly, you can begin to make out the shape of hope.

Paul woke in the bottom of an Iowa pool and saw God face to face and they said to one another, "I come to the end--I am still with you."

The Easter miracle we get to share in baptism is that the end is a new beginning.

Death is transformed into a new start of life.

The scandal and unspeakable horror of crucifixion is transformed into a pledge and pathway of salvation that still, millenia later, defies explanation and understanding.

And now, just as mysteriously and unpredictably and marvelously, the broken water of the country club pool is transformed into the womb of God.

Paul's senseless and stupid death is transformed into a violent birth into a blessed forever, only and totally by the creative, forgiving, restoring grace of God.

Paul's baptism twenty years ago remains for us a dim-mirror glimpse into a love that is bottomless and abiding, deeper even than the sighs of a grieving mother, deeper than we can ever see or know, large enough to hold us all.

May that deep love continue to hold each and all of us, and carry us through the deep darkness of this long night of grief, until one day we too wake and see Paul, and God, and ourselves, face to face, for the first time, and forever.