

Over the years I've celebrated several hundred funerals, and at each one I try to personalize the homily a bit by getting to know the story of the person who crossed over by talking to their family, often children and grandchildren. And while you of course get all kinds of stories, one of the common themes in them is how in so many ways, the person who's life we are celebrating and praying for made them a better person. They taught them how to reach their potential, to overcome their struggles, and was there for them through the highs and lows of life. But to truly help someone, they know they can't do it alone, for they do this cooperating with the only person who can love perfectly, namely our God.

Jim Billings, like most every dad, is a man who loved his daughter deeply. But in a story he shares about his relationship with his daughter, he realized that he could only do so much, and that his daughter was also in God's hands. On his end, he could love her, but he also needed God to pull her out of her abyss, and working together, they were able to make that happen.

He came home from work one day and could barely recognize his own daughter. She was right in front of him, slouching down the stairs. There

was no missing her piercing blue eyes, her strong hands for shooting baskets. But something was different, something was wrong. His 17-year-old had changed so quickly in the last few months.

He and his wife always called her Breezy—like her headlong embrace of life. When she was little, people stopped them in shopping malls to tell her how beautiful she was—her eager grin, her wavy blonde hair, her clear, delicate skin. But the girl who shouldered him aside and stalked outside that day wore a scowl. Her hair was dyed black, her face blotchy and broken out. “Breezy,” he said.

“What?”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.” A car had pulled up. Breezy’s new friends were in it. They were older. Their arms were covered with tattoos. Their noses were pierced. Their hair was dyed black. They stared sullenly from behind the windows.

“Not with them, you’re not,” I said.

“I’m late,” she snapped, and ran out the door. She was already climbing into the back seat when she turned and yelled, “You can’t tell me who my friends are! I hate you!”

Then the car sped away.

Jim stood, silence settling over him. Shelley, his wife, stared at the floor then walked to the kitchen. Not long before, Breezy had been a happy girl. The house had been filled with the laughter of her basketball teammates. But, then, over the course of the summer before her senior year, everything changed. Jim had always been so sure about the way they raised Breezy. Where had he gone wrong he wondered?

Breezy, their middle child, was a tomboy, a daddy’s girl, the one who never left his side. Shelley, sometimes, found her hard to handle. But he knew her like he knew himself—she was fearless, tough, a bit willful at times. He remembers driving up their block one day. A 10-speed bike was rolling toward him, piloted by a tiny form. It was Breezy, four years old, straddling

the cross-bar and leaning low to reach the pedals. To stop she kicked her foot against a wall.

She bypassed dolls and went straight to sports—soccer first, then basketball in third grade. When he washed the car, she scrubbed the hubcaps with her own little sponge. When he went to the store, she was out the door before him, blonde ponytail jammed through the back of her baseball cap. He could still feel the slap of sun as they eased the convertible from the cool, dark garage. “Take the top down, Daddy!” she’d yell.

To Jim’s regret, they didn’t go driving very often. He was a business consultant. He worked evenings and weekends. He left for weeks on assignment. He knew his family missed him. But they caught up on vacations. And Jim made sure the kids got the no-excuses discipline he had growing up. He’d been a military policeman in the service, then worked as a cop during college. He was strict. He was loving. And it worked.

He remembers once, when Breezy was a junior in high school, she asked if we could go out to dinner, just the two of us. In the booth, she started

crying. “I was trying not to tell you, but I can’t be dishonest with you. Dad, I’m so sorry, but I went to a party where there was beer and I tasted one. It was terrible!”

At first, Jim flushed with pride at her honesty. But then a small fear spoke. Parties. Beer. Where else was she going? Was she still Daddy’s little girl? Jim resolved to keep an even closer eye on her.

By high school, Breezy was a basketball star. His work had kept the family moving every few years. But they finally settled in a Portland suburb so Breezy could join one of the state’s best teams. He wanted to make sure she had every opportunity. Shelley and Jim—when Jim was in town—would cheer so loud at her games that Breezy said her parents embarrassed her.

Though Shelley and Jim cheered for Breezy together on the court, they differed when it came to discipline. Shelley was more willing to give Breezy space; Jim was a stickler for the rules, maybe because of his police background and maybe because he wasn’t always around to watch her. Strict rules did the job when he couldn’t.

Then, right before her seventeenth birthday, Breezy was caught missing practice. Her coach threw her off the summer team and told her that if she wanted to rejoin in the fall, she needed to shape up. It was then that Jim began to notice changes.

First, their house fell silent. The hungry athletes who came home with Breezy to raid the fridge and watch the big-screen TV disappeared. She took to her room. Loud, hostile music sent out the message: Stay away. Strange kids began to drop by and loiter on the lawn. She dyed her hair. Then came that day when he got home from work and she told him she hated him before getting into the car with people his instinct told him were no good.

Things didn't improve that fall. One night he was working late. The phone rang. It was their pastor. "Jim, I don't know how to tell you this."

"What?"

“Breezy is addicted to methamphetamine. Shelley’s taken her to the hospital. They’re there right now.” Jim twisted the phone cord. How come he hadn’t known? Why hadn’t he seen that this was what was behind the changes in his daughter? Suddenly, Jim knew all the answers to the questions that had been plaguing him. I knew why she wouldn’t speak to them. Why her looks changed so drastically. Why she snuck out to careen through the city with those sinister “friends”. Everything clicked. Drugs.

“Jim, are you there? Are you okay?”

He put the phone down and got into the car. The speedometer edged to 75. Freeway lights flicked past. At the hospital, a doctor led him through the ER to a bed encircled by a curtain. He tugged the curtain aside, and there was Breezy crouched on a bed, long arms curled around bony knees. She looked up warily. He could tell she was regretting the confession to Shelley that had landed her here. Why hadn’t she come to Jim like she had about the beer?

“Breezy,” he said. But her eyes were vacant, cold.

“Your daughter has been using for about six months,” the doctor said to him. “I asked what time she last took drugs. She said eight o’clock tonight.”

Jim looked at his watch. It was 9:30 P.M. She’d been home that night, and even out driving with their youngest daughter.

He stumbled from the bed and hid his eyes. “But I warned her. I watched her. Drugs were against the rules. I gave her everything. What did I do wrong?” He asked himself.

Within a few days his wife found a treatment center recommended by a friend, and drove Breezy there. It was a nine-month program. No phone calls, but she could write. At home, he checked the mail obsessively. But no letters arrived. He’d taken some time off, so all day he sat at home, trapped in his deepest interior. At first, he tried blaming Shelley. Too permissive. But then he wondered. Was it him? Had he been too strict? He replayed Breezy’s childhood, the times he laid down the rules, especially about drugs. He remembered telling her what he had seen as a policeman—furtive, conniving addicts stripped of everything but their desire to get high. Should I have done more he asked himself?

The days wore on. Jim's thoughts twisted and re-twisted, always looping back to a single image: Breezy staring at him, through him in that emergency room. As a cop he had seen countless addicts cycle through recovery programs. An addict is an addict, he'd concluded. Now the thought crushed him. How could he guide her? How could he make her Daddy's little girl again?

Then, one morning, exhausted and broken, he started his morning devotions at the kitchen table. Outside a drizzling rain soaked the trees. The house was quiet. Jim was alone, staring at the Bible that lay closed on the table before him. He buried his face in his hands. "Lord, how do I get through this? How do I know you have your hand in this?" He opened the Bible and leafed through it. Suddenly, a new image came to mind. Always before, Jim had obsessed over what he did, what he should have done, what he could do now. What about God? He's the healer, not him. Breezy is in his hands, not Jim's. This was a hard thought. He resisted it. But I'm the father, Jim insisted. I'm the one who takes care of things and shapes his kids. But the image of God the healer wouldn't go away.

Jim realized he needed to commit Breezy to his hands and concentrate on the one thing he could do: love his daughter. He grabbed a pen and paper. "Dear Breezy," he wrote. "I've been praying for you. I hope you're doing all right. I love and miss you. Dad." No lectures. No threats. He took the letter to the post office.

Returning home a short while later, he leafed through the mail. His heart leaped. Her handwriting on a letter! He tore open the envelope and read, "Dear Dad. Many things are happening here at rehab. I'm feeling better. I never want to go back to the dark life I was living." He held the letter in his hand for a long time, his tears falling on it. Was it only coincidence that it had arrived on just this day? Or was it the answer to a prayer he'd found so hard to say? To give his daughter completely to a higher power.

Breezy got out of rehab. She still had struggles, as we all do. Jim believes her now when she says she'll never return to drugs. But Breezy's part, like any addict's, is not easy. She finished high school and is working, and is thinking about going to college. She let go of her druggie pals, but has found it hard to make new friends. Jim prays for her constantly.

One Sunday not long ago they were getting ready for church. He was about to shout up the stairs for Breezy to hurry up when all at once she appeared at the top. His mind froze and so did Breezy. He looked at her for a long moment, as if she were poised in some limbo between the young, innocent Breezy who'd once been his little sidekick, and the Breezy who had been ravaged by methamphetamine, a shadow daughter whom he didn't know. Then she smiled, her eyes bright and clear. "Let's go," she said. "I don't want to be late."

Like Breezy, for all of us, sin impacts our lives in one way or another. We slip up, sometimes becoming addicted to one particular sin. Or we justify things we should not do. But how does one find the way out? We can help ourselves. People can help. And those are very important things to remember. But it is only God who can see us through to the finish line. As Paul says in our second reading, it is faith that justifies us and "we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance proven character and proven character hope, and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." God doesn't just cheer

us on. God creates, redeems, and sanctifies (makes us holy). And that's at the center of Trinity Sunday.

We talk about the Trinity quite a bit, each and every week. But while many of us here have been saying the words to the Nicene Creed for years, have you ever for a moment thought about the meaning of those words? "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father..." and "the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified?" Words mean things, and hopefully we didn't just memorize them back in CCD class but learned the meaning behind the words.

Here's the meaning: God, Father, Son and Spirit, are all related in love, and pure love, and in the Son, we have God who is fully present with us, but also fully human. Centuries ago, when that creed was hammered out in the early days of the Church, a priest named Arius, from the Egyptian town of Alexandria, when having a discussion on theology, said Jesus was essentially like Hercules. The best of God's creation. But that Jesus was created. Well, here's the problem as some began to ponder this. If Jesus

was created and there was a time when He was not, then wouldn't He need saving too? What then of the crucifixion? And other priests and bishops pushed back.

The emperor Constantine, with Christianity now the religion of the land, wanted them to sort it all out, so he called for a council in Nicea, a town near Constantinople. And after prayer, debate and discussion, the Creed which we have said ever since has been said up and down the centuries by Christians. Jesus, God Himself became incarnate, hence the term "consubstantial" with the Father; or of the same substance. We hear that in the first reading too, as we as Christians read it as the Son being with the Father when all was created. And that is why when we look at the Cross, when we look at the Eucharist, we see how far God is willing to go for us. Your friend can't redeem you. Neither can your father or your mother. But God can. And, as Jim realized, he had to trust Breezy into His hands, for God is pure love. And we can do the same, realizing that no matter what happens in life, God is there, and through Him, we are redeemed. All we have to do is reach out.

But with that too comes a challenge. To emulate the Trinity and be a person where love has no obstacles within us. It starts with ourselves, asking ourselves what we have done and failed to do as we say in the confessor. What is it that is standing in the way of us loving God and one another to our potential? Whether its busyness, a sin of habit, or whatever, remember we don't want to be to borrow from Stevie Wonder part time lovers of God, we want to love Him fully as he loves us.

And that's what leads us to the challenge every time we make the Sign of the Cross and look at the Cross. The Cross again reminds us of how far God goes for us. So how far do we go for one another? Love is so much more than sending a card or gift but a series of actions, some of them difficult. Jim stopped at nothing to help his daughter, linking his love with the power of God's. So how far do we go for one another? Do we see people as icons of the Trinity? Or do we see them as just a stranger on a computer who we can look at, a nameless employee in the service industry or telephone salesperson whom we can be condescending to, or someone who we can berate on social media for their beliefs? Society dehumanizes people. And we can become complacent. So how do we treat others is something we must always think about too. Are we willing to be hated like

Jim from a family member whom we have to challenge? Do we strive to see past anger and see the potential in people and journey with them through their valleys as Jim did for his daughter? And as I said last week, are you willing to be vilified and hated for the sake of the Gospel by being an apologist or defender of the faith when you talk about how we respond to love by saying yes to some things and no to others? Make no doubt about it, talk about the sanctity of marriage as man and woman, the sanctity of unborn human life, or the good that the Catholic Church does by defending Her or any number of hot button issues, and you may be instantly vilified and attacked, especially by the keyboard warriors online. God showed us love, and our response was to kill Jesus. But He was undeterred in His words and actions, and so must we be too if we want to be agents of God's love in the world.

As I journeyed to priesthood, I was able to learn about the faith both as a child and in seminary. But one of my greatest teachers has always been my dad. He along with my mom taught me the content of the faith in terms of explaining why we go to Mass, why we pray and how to pray. But through them both, I've seen that love in action. In my own dad, I've seen a hard-working man like Saint Joseph who has done so much for his family.

I've seen patience. I've seen someone who never asks "what's in it for me?" And I've seen a man of faith. Along the way, I've made plenty of mistakes too, and like most all of us, I wish I could go back in time and say a few words to my younger self in various situations and say "you really might want to make a different decision here." But through it all, my dad has been a beacon of love and hope to me, guiding me along like so many of our great dads, because he, like Breezy's dad to her, is a true icon of the Trinity. In life, it is so easy to get lost like Breezy did. But God's response is to love without conditions, to be with us always not from afar but in the trenches of daily life. And he gives us the challenge to do this for one another too. To our dads and moms and to so many, thank you for all you do for us, and may we learn from God and our parents how to do the same for one another. Love is a beautiful thing, but as the Trinity shows us, love also requires a response - so as we invoke the Father, Son and Spirit, may we welcome that love into our hearts but never stop striving to put that love into action.