Funerals and the suffering of loss are among the most difficult things we as humans face. And there is no getting around the fact that loss is real and hard; for even Jesus cries when His friend Lazarus dies. But there is also the truth that Jesus promises us in our Gospel that God's love for us is so deep, which is why Jesus came to be with us. But with this, there is the reality that when we die, while on the one hand we go to be with the Lord, there is also this connection that we have with our faithful departed, where we pray for one another. And we also keep in mind the fact that to get to where we want to go, namely heaven, it takes a transformation for God's love to change us so we love in the way that he does, without any blind spots due to sin. When we do that, that love has the power to do so much to change ourselves and others in so many ways.

In a short story entitled "The Funeral that Made a Family," shared by LeDayne Polaski who worked in a Baptist church in Charlotte, North Carolina, she writes about the challenging situation that her grandmother was in.

She writes about a man being the love of her life, but most of his family never knowing that his love, her grandmother, even existed. They loved

one another for more than 50 years, but they never married, never shared a home, and never had a child together.

When they met, her grandmother was a pretty, lonely young widow with a toddler daughter, who was LeDayne's mom, and he was a handsome young bachelor who dated but had never found "the right one." From the start, they knew they had found something special. They knew they had discovered a lifetime love.

But there was a problem, and a big problem. Perhaps not so much for God, but for people. She was from a strict Baptist home, and he was from a family of Jewish immigrants from the Old World. Their parents told them that if they married, they would not be their children anymore.

It was agonizing - they loved their families and they loved each other. They were told they had to choose. But, LeDayne reflects, how do you rip your heart in half? How do you tell your heart whom to love?

And so they lived more than 5 decades in a delicate balancing act - loving one another intensely yet never marrying and never living together.

LeDayne writes that she and her family knew him well. But most of his family never knew of her existence. They thought he was a lonely bachelor all his life. Those who did know never spoke of her.

They had great happiness. He was a gourmet cook who came over every Tuesday and Thursday to create an amazing meal. They were avid about hunting and fishing and spent one day every weekend in their boat on the lake. They took amazing trips every summer - they visited all the latest restaurants - they celebrated birthdays and “anniversaries” (as they could) and holidays. For more than 50 years, they shared their lives and they were happy.

But they also had the sadness of never being affirmed as a couple, of never sharing a home, of never sharing events with his family, of never having a child together. It hurt even after decades.

After 50 years of the same happiness and the same sadness, LeDayne’s grandmother passed away. Not long afterwards, her companion of a lifetime died as well.

Somehow in the midst of his final days, his family learned about the great love of his life. Their two families came together at his funeral. They asked them to sit with them at the service and the burial (the rabbi a bit confused but supportive). Afterwards, they shared a meal. Around those tables, stories abounded. Having never known her grandmother, they had not really known him either.

And so the stories went and were shared. You didn't know that he loved to fish? Well they went fishing together every week. Let me tell you about the time she caught the biggest fish. You didn't know he was a great cook? Well let me tell you about his terrific spaghetti.

You never knew about their trips? Well we have these great pictures of them down in Florida.

It was at the lunch that LeDayne's youngest daughter Katie met his equally young grand-niece Abigail. They looked at each other curiously - two little girls in the midst of a room full of grown-ups.

They were shy at first. They were not sure how to get started being family with someone they'd never met before.

Then Abigail had an idea. "Would you like to see the doll I got for Hanukkah?" she asked. Katie nodded. The doll came out.

They began to play, quietly at first. Before long, they were chasing one another through the room - shouting and laughing. Then they joined hands and started singing "Ring Around the Rosie." Round and round they twirled - smiling, giggling, and holding hands.

All of a sudden everything got quiet as every adult in the room noticed them. All the aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents - those who had always known and those who had just found out. They just stopped and watched. Then they smiled. Then they finally came together, all because of two little girls and a doll.

A decades-long love was finally complete.

Katie and Abigail became friends. They also became family.

And now, LeDayne closes, they all know.
What they know is what we all hope to know one day too - what love is really all about.

The problem we face as humans is sin, namely the sins of our lives, the choices we make, and what we call the effects of Original Sin, when at some point humanity chose to not trust God. Its what harms us, and prevents us from seeing and understanding as we should; wether is it the sin of rejecting someone over religion or race, or whatever it may be.

God though knows us well. He knows that deep down, we are good. And so He gives us life, but He also gives us the Son and the Spirit - and also one another. For us, the task is to rediscover what Katie and Abby found and then taught others.

This feast of All Souls Day reminds us we can get to that point of perfect love, and the way it is done is through learning from God and one another.

As a starting point, we remember that we believe death is in the sense a transition from one world to the next, but it is not all of one or another in the sense that people tend to do that. Some think all there is is this world; so life for the moment. Others though think this world is so awful and the point is to get out of here as soon as possible, as if our soul is somehow trapped in the body. That is not true either. Rather the body and soul are united and connected; even when we die, we believe that we step outside the bounds of time, which is why we can pray over a body and go to a cemetery, but also believe that a person is body and soul in heaven.

With that kind of mindset, what we can remember too is that the connection continues after we die. The loss we suffer is real, but the connection to our loved one isn't just memories. It's why eulogies for instance generally aren't given at Catholic funerals; maybe some brief words of remembrance but we don't gather to hear about grandma's cooking or grandpa's love of golf for 20 minutes. The funeral celebrates life but also the connection that is still there; of how this person is so loved by God, but also still with us too in the sense that we pray for one another.

As for what that entails, we believe that God hears our prayers; the saints, whom we honor on All Saints Day, are in heaven. Many are there we do not know about. But you can think of saints as a friend; not just a statue or a picture to remind you of someone who once was, but someone who is in your corner, close to God - which is why we invoke saints and ask for their prayers. They help bring us closer to God, and to discover who we are meant to become. How then do we join them?

It all starts with the love of God, of God always seeking us out as we hear in that Gospel. God will us to be with Him.

But God also wants us to choose to love Him, and it's with effort that happens. For sometimes sin creeps in; you take the two families whose eyes needed to be opened. At some level they maybe thought they were respecting their religion; in fact they had become Pharisees blind to the love that was right before them that could have been a beautiful marriage as well. But their eyes were opened in part through the two girls who became friends, but also through the stories shared at that funeral; through the example of the two people whose lives they remembered that day, who in a sense also taught them what love is all about.

As such, for you and me we strive to grow in love throughout our lives, calling to mind our sins and shortcomings, and asking for God's help and that of each other, living and deceased. The saints we believe are in heaven to intercede and help us. But when we die, at times there is a bit of work to be done. This is what we call the purification of sin in purgatory, one of the most misunderstood doctrines of our faith. Sometimes it is thought of as some kind of minimum security prison or concentration camp, or a miserable place. Other times it gets caught up in thinking of time, where one thinks of it as a sentence before being released to heaven. It's important to remember time is a concept of our earth; when we leave the earth, we are outside the confines of time, which is why we can visit a cemetery and pay our respects but believe the person is in the afterlife with their glorified body. It's not waiting or doing time, but rather about learning how to purge, the root word of purgatory. In writing on it, then-Cardinal Ratzinger said: "There is no fire, only the Lord Himself."

Jesus stresses love of God with your whole heart, mind and soul, and then to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If I were to do a show of hands, I think everyone's hand would go up when I asked "who here loves God?"

But do we fully? It's a struggle. Pope Benedict wrote that it is "only with difficulty" this happens and that we need an encounter with the Lord to transform us, to remove all the muck that builds up over a lifetime; those loves of self, of sins such as pride or of the flesh. Despite the sins and despite forgiveness, the effects remain and as such we see His face, as Saint Paul put it, as through a glass darkly. His love is the fire that, the late pope said, "burns away our dross and re-forms us to be vessels of eternal joy." The spiritual life is a series of steps forward with an occasional step back. Purgatory corrects this. It's a process that involves learning how to let go, of letting the Lord transform us so we can love Him properly, a cleansing fire. In the words of one preacher, it is not a place where bad people become good people, but where good people become perfected in love. As far as pain, don't think of it as a physical pain, but rather a blessed pain that; a pain then involves letting go of those things we might cling to that are sinful that keep us from loving God as we should that bring pleasure, and can be hard to let go of. Ultimately, it's a state of joy where we learn how to be perfected.

With that in mind, I think it's important on the one hand to pray for our dead and be mindful of the fact that we are all flawed, having not shame but a healthy sense of our love for God, and a desire to grow in that love.

And this is where I think we need to learn from the good of those who have gone on before us, like those families did at that funeral. I think often of the loved ones I've lost, and I truly believe they pray for me, but I think of their lives and I'm inspired to become better. To emulate things like patience, forgiveness, compassion, working hard and serving others. I have no doubt the people at the funeral that day shared stories and friendships developed because of the example of LeDayne's grandmother and the love of her life. So it is with our loved ones too. We look back on the memories, but we also look forward to being with them one day in heaven. And we also pray for them, too. Hardly anyone gets up at a funeral and speaks of the not so good things about a person; but those flaws are there in us all. Sometimes they need to be talked about with others, in some cases with a good therapist if they were serious things, so we ourselves can find healing. But maybe a loved one struggled with this or that; their temper, their gossip, their attitude, a bad habit, whatever it might be. Dysfunction is pretending these things aren't there. Rather, we acknowledge that people we cared

about maybe had things to work on like we did, and we pray for them as God helps them overcome those things for good. Sometimes that's tough as we all know people who are hard to love. But if Saint Paul and Saint Stephen, the man who Paul helped kill when he was a young zealous Pharisee named Saul, can be brothers in heaven together as saints, so too can the people in our lives who are hard to live. On our part may we pray for God's help to forgive, to deal with the past, and then ultimately for the people we know who have died to become saints too.

Death is difficult and it is real; and there are days where we need to be in touch with that sadness and pain. But let us never forget where we are going. Our readings this week are filled with such hope: "The souls of the just are in the hand of God" and "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me and I will not reject anyone who comes to me" Jesus tells us in the Gospel. If God looked to us and saw just evil, He would not have become one of us. God loves us so much, and that means He loves the entire package. We are a Church of sinners and saints, and all flawed in our own way. To get to that final destination, it requires work - but its something we can do when we are spiritually mature, saying Lord I love you and I want to try to be perfect - something your grace can help me do.

That takes a lot of effort, but God shows us through His love, and in His wisdom sends us people who teach us so much, and our connection to them will never end. So may our minds and hearts be open to seeing that love as we pray for one another, helping one another to become saints and achieve what those two families finally found at that funeral that brought them together - the happiness that comes with a true love no longer darkened through sin and it’s impacts. Jesus helps us to see just as he restored sight to the blind, but so too do we help one another see as well the path to heaven. May we truly see who we can become, and how to get there by reaching out to God and one another.