

HAVE NO FEAR, LITTLE FLOCK - Luke 12: 22-27, 32
Funeral Service for Casey John Russo - July 1, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + The Rev. Roy Almquist

We do not want to be here this morning. Calvary Lutheran Church is a beautiful place .. a source of strength and encouragement for many .. a place associated with both serenity and joy. But we do not want to be here.

Now Calvary Lutheran Church is not the problem. We do not want to be here because today represents something totally obscene, something that outrages our sense of justice and fairness -- the untimely death of someone we love. That event brings us together and for that reason we wish this day was not necessary.

Generally, people do not go to church on Tuesdays! This sanctuary would normally be empty right now. Adults should be working. Teenagers should be at their summer jobs or enjoying themselves on these first free days after school.

But something happened a week ago and that singular event has caused a tearing, crushing change in all of our lives. And so, we have come here in hope .. in hope that we might experience something or hear something that will strengthen us. We have come here to give thanks for the life of Casey John Russo, a very special young man who brought joy, happiness, and great good humor to his family and his friends.

The one thing we will not receive this morning is an answer for why Casey and Mike died on June 23. We know that there are physical laws of the universe that require that no two objects can occupy the same place at the same time, but physical laws bring us no comfort.

I hope no one believes that God wanted this to happen. I realize that some people like to imagine an ordered universe where nothing occurs that is not precisely what God wants to have happen. But I do not believe that. I do not believe that God wanted two sixteen-year-old boys to die on Burke Road last Monday. The God I know and trust wants only good for his children. But this God gives us freedom to make decisions and choices,

- Sometimes our decisions and choices put us in harm's way and cause suffering to ourselves and to others.

- Sometimes we make careless decisions, we miscalculate our abilities ... we place too much confidence in our strength, our quick reflexes, and our invincibility .. and then something terrible occurs.

But this kind of tragedy is never what God wants.

The Gospel lesson that I chose for our time together this morning comes from some words of instruction Jesus gave to the people who were drawn to him. His message to them was that they should not be obsessed with worry and apprehension. They should live their lives fully, not holding back, trusting in God. In a way, that is precisely what Casey did.

When Casey was an infant, John and Lisa brought him to this church. The building was radically transformed and enlarged in 1997, so this space looks quite different today. But it was here at Calvary that I baptized Casey in 1992, and, by virtue of that simple act, Casey John Russo became a child of God and was marked by the cross of Christ forever. Casey grew up in this church. He attended pre-school here and was a part of Calvary's Sunday School. Casey was an acolyte and confirmed his faith at this altar not very long ago.

Those of you who knew Casey probably could not see the cross that we outlined on his forehead when he was baptized .. but God could see it. Like most of you here today, Casey did a lot of wild and wonderful, exhilarating and outrageous things in his short life .. but all of his extreme sports never erased that cross for it is indelible. And on that awful night it means that cross means Casey was never alone but the God who called him in his baptism, made him a sheep of his fold, and promised to give him the Kingdom was there before anyone else to embrace Casey and hold him in loving arms.

Many of you have shared your memories of Casey and we thank you for the beautiful picture you have painted of your friend. I would particularly like to thank the Russo family for pulling together all the exquisite photos and videos, a unique tribute to Casey. In addition to all of these beautiful images, I invite you to squint your eyes now and see that cross on Casey's forehead .. that act which marked Casey as a child of God forever.

The Gospel reading ended with the simply promise: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* [Luke 12: 32]. That is the hope of those who love the Lord and put their trust in Him. God has promised us that nothing can or will ever separate us from his love. Whether we live or

whether we die, we belong to the Lord. We do not earn God's favor .. it is *God's good pleasure* to give it to you .. and to me .. and to Casey.

So, even though we do not want to be in this Church on a Tuesday morning, I am glad that we are here. We could be sad by ourselves. But here we have the possibility to give thanks for Casey's life .. too short but very rich in love and kindness. Here we have a chance to taste the ultimate healing that God can give to us when we embrace each other and say words of comfort and encouragement.

And to Lisa and John, Bradley and Jesse .. I am glad you are here to see how profoundly Casey's life has touched the lives of so many. Casey soared like a bright comet and his flight was short, but he was a great source of joy and the remembrance of his radiance will remain in your hearts forever!

So hold onto the best of your memories. Hold on to each other. Hold onto the unconditional promises of God. Feel God's strength. And then follow Casey's simple philosophy and get up from where you have fallen in grief. Get on your bike again.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus. AMEN.