

Tom Westhoven, SCJ
Born into eternal life: June 28, 2023
Mass of Christian Burial: July 7, 2023

First reading: Lamentations 3:17-26
Second reading: Romans 14:7-9, 10-12
Gospel: John 6:37-40

Theme: Lamentation and Hope

Tom Westhoven was the first SCJ I talked to when I initially discerned my vocation with the Priests of the Sacred Heart. That was in 1993. At that time, I had only been in the US for three years. No doubt, my English was poor. And I suspect Tom didn't understand my English very well because I was still learning the language. I respect Tom's patience.

I did not know Tom well. I really only got to know him in his later years when he moved to the retirement community here in Franklin. So I talked to different SCJs to better understand who Tom was. Drawing from what I heard and trying to figure out Tom's message from the scriptural readings he selected, I would like to focus on lamentation and hope.

The Book of Lamentations was written in one of the most tragic periods in the history of ancient Israel. During the Babylonian captivity, the Temple was destroyed, and the people were forced into exile. The book captures the feelings of loss and hopelessness that the Israelites experienced during this period.

The passage preceding the first reading contains raw grief and lament. It speaks of a man afflicted by God because God is leading people into darkness and has turned against them. In this lament, the believer struggles to come to terms not only with the plight of his people but also with the plight of his faith in God.

Despite the darkness of the subject matter, the book offers a message of hope and resilience. We see a turning point with the verses in today's first reading. Although the believer is deprived of peace and is tormented, he trusts God's faithfulness or *hesed* in Hebrew. He reminds himself that God's steadfast love never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. And his hope revives. The foundation of lament is that God loves us and is merciful.

God's faithful love is emphasized again in the Gospel reading. Jesus makes it clear that whoever comes to him will never be turned away and that all who believe in him will have eternal life. It's so comforting to know that he will raise us up on the last day.

What was Tom trying to tell us with the selection of these readings? Perhaps, like many of us, he lamented his shortcomings. We all have shortcomings, and one of Tom's was stubbornness. Duane Lemke, the house superior, told me that Tom was very stubborn. If he drove the wrong way on the highway, he would complain about other people going the wrong way.

Perhaps, his shortcomings took away his peace and possibly his feeling of worthiness before God and others.

But I believe that Tom held on to God's assurances of love and mercy, which enabled him to believe that despite his shortcomings, he was loved and still had much to give to others. Tom wrote in one of his reflections: "For me, being an SCJ means that I strive to give of myself totally out of love for the One who loves me and each person. As an SCJ, I recognize the calling to be inwardly dedicated to returning the love the Heart of Jesus has for each of us." Tom recognized that he was loved, and he strived to return love with love. As St. Paul reminds us in the second reading, the letter to the Romans, no one lives for himself.

Tom was committed to the Native Americans in South Dakota. He served there for more than 20 years. He was a very generous man. As a cook, he always made sure to share his delicious creations with everyone around him. Sometimes he did his own version of Robin Hood, taking food from the community dining room and giving it to others. He supplied us with popcorn; those who have been guests in the community mention that in their memories of Tom. And of course, some of us can't forget the time he accidentally set off the smoke alarm when making yet another batch of his famous popcorn.

Tom, we remember his infectious smile and generous spirit. You lived your religious life with the assurance of God's mercy and the promise of eternal life. We all share this belief with you, my brother. May you go in peace as you journey home to the Lord. Pray for the US Province. Pray for us. Thank you for your vocation to religious life as a Priest of the Sacred Heart. Vivat Cor Jesu. Per Cor Mariae.