

Flowers and Friends

In the hour following the tragic, senseless shooting in Tucson, as the wounded and dead were brought to the Tucson University Medical Center, someone brought a bundle of flowers and placed them outside the hospital, near the entrance. As the word spread of the tragedy, many others soon arrived. Some also brought flowers which were added to what became a growing pile. Others arrived with balloons. Some added personal notes, photographs, and candles. And in honor of the nine year old girl who was killed in the cross fire of the attempted assassination, teddy bears were added to the pile.

Each day, the “grotto” of remembrance has grown. People come and stand in front of the burgeoning display, some crying, or praying, or singing, or hugging one another, or just staring in silence.

This scene isn't new to us or uncommon. We observed the same phenomena after 9/11 in Manhattan; and in front of Columbine High School, and all over England following the death of Princess Diana, and on a smaller scale, in roadside spontaneous memorials where fatal car accidents have taken place.

As I ponder this, I feel the emptiness and loneliness of a “post-modern” society which has lost much of its faith based foundation. I am especially moved and saddened to note how many young adults seem to have no other place to go to express and process their grief, other than a make shift pile of flowers, balloons and teddy bears.

In the aftermath of any tragedy, we find comfort and meaning in many ways. I have learned that we all grieve differently. But I have also observed again and again that we find strength in two sources.

Did you pick up on the amazing moment that Representative Giffords opened her eyes, only four days after being shot in the head? She had just been visited by the President. Her husband had been constantly beside her. And the medical attention she has received has been by all accounts exceptional. Yet, she didn't open her eyes until two of her “girlfriends” from congress (as they called themselves) were at her bedside and spoke to her. Such is the power of friendship. It wasn't the doctors, nurses, President or even her husband who got her to open her eyes- it was her friends!

Who are your friends? I sense that while we have lots of people we are friendly with, we have but few true friends. As I reflect on “Facebook”- the dynamic social networking internet system, I am a bit dismayed that the term “friend” has been used for anyone seeking to access a person's “page”. Is it possible that all these Facebook “friends” are really our “friends”?

At the Last Supper, Jesus declared, “I call you friends”. The second most important resource for dealing with tragedy is certainly our faith. It is a resource often neglected and taken for granted. Christians find strength in being fed by Word and Sacrament. And we readjust our attitudes by being givers, not griever. The loneliness symbolized

by the piles of flowers, balloons and teddy bears is not something to take lightly. All our communities of faith in this region welcome those seeking solace and peace. Our antidote is simple- friendship with God and community with one another. We also grieve. But we attempt to move on, by being givers. And we have learned that there is an absolute power in the friendship of a dear one and friendship with our Lord, a power that helps us to open our eyes.