

Mass of Christian Burial for Bro. Donald Geiger, SM  
Queen of Apostles Chapel,  
Mount Saint John, Dayton  
January 9, 2021

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 23; Romans 8:14-23; Matthew 5:1-12a

We were having a late summer picnic on the lawn just outside of the Novitiate on the Grotto side. It was probably Labor Day, a month into my first year of novitiate. As divine Providence would have it, we forgot something, and I was sent back inside, down the stairs to the kitchen to retrieve I don't remember what. While I was in the kitchen, as Providence would have it, the phone rang, a call which would not have been heard outside. I answered it. The caller, a woman, asked for Brother Geiger. When I hesitated, saying that we were all outside, could he call her back later, she explained with urgency that she was a researcher in the middle of an experiment and needed to ask Bro. Geiger for advice on her experiment. Oh, and -- she was calling from -- New Zealand. On a landline. In 1985. No answering machine. The word "voicemail" had as yet never yet been spoken upon the earth. That was surely an expensive phone call. But that researcher was very lucky -- or divinely blessed - to get through on the first try under those circumstances. Bro. Don missed the first part of our picnic. And I got my first sense of the global impact of the biologist Brother who lived two doors down from me.

You would have never known that he was a big deal. Other Marianists had told me that Bro. Don was a brilliant scientist. But he would never dream of flaunting his accomplishments. Most of the other professed Brothers lived in the slightly larger - but still quite modest - bedrooms in the central part of the building. But Brother Don was happy in one of the smallest rooms the south alcove above the

living room. His room was a study of efficient use of space so much that both daily discipline and huge doses of patience must have been necessary to live in it. During the day, Don would transfer 6 to 8 organized stacks of books, papers, articles, dissertations and professional journals from his desk to his neatly made bed to clear his desk for work. Every night, so he could sleep, he would move them back from his bed to his desk. His room was tidy, simple and spare, but there was an extravagance of plants inside his room, and in the small forest he cared for just outside his room in the wide hallway with south facing windows. It strikes me now that Don was happy with that small corner room in part because of the southern exposure and because the other window faced east, toward the rising sun.

Since his death, Don's gentle humility was emphasized again and again by former students, colleagues, and members of the Marianist Family. "He was one of the best teachers I ever had. When I later told him this, he showed his humility time after time. He wanted to serve, to heal, to preserve and respect our sacred planet. He never cared about accolades!" "A brilliant, humble, saintly man who taught us all so much!" "Bro. Don was one of the most intelligent and kindest souls I have ever known. He added richness to the Biology department and to the lives of so many."

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Bro. Don was an outstanding plant physiologist. He won numerous awards and was invited to present at major conferences throughout the world. At his

sixtieth jubilee as a Marianist Brother he wrote “plant physiology provided a means to serve society while teaching gave me a means to pass on this message to students.” Science in service of society; teaching in service of the future of humanity: the best of the Catholic, Marianist tradition. Here is just some of the legacy of Bro. Donald Geiger: worldwide food production research; hands-on clean water research with students; management of invasive species; pioneering work in restoration of native species and habitat; nature preserves and conservation easements; safer winter roads due to the anti-icing effect of beet juice slurry, a well-known fully-biodegradable herbicide that does not harm the soil or neighboring plants, Strategies for Responsible Development; the River Stewards, Natural Burial Processes at Calvary Cemetery; restoring native tall-grass prairies to Ohio and beyond; a burgeoning Catholic spirituality of environment and ecology.

More striking even than science in service of society, Bro. Don was a proponent of science in service of **faith**. UD Biology Department chair Karolyn Hansen said simply, “Brother Don touched so many lives through both his science and his faith.” Former student Nan Schivone writes, “Brother Don persuaded me to take an advanced level plant physiology class the last semester of my senior year. We both knew I was in way over my head, but he told me that I must at least attempt comprehension of the exact photosynthetic processes if only to deepen respect for the divine at play in the plant world....I never regretted taking that course. Ultimately, I came to understand this most important of Brother Don’s lessons: Learn simply because you are curious and want to appreciate life on this Earth.” For those today who are tempted to believe the contemporary fallacy that serious

science is incompatible with serious Christian faith, I submit to you Brother Don Geiger: a life and legacy of rigorous, world-class science and vigorous, intelligent Catholic Christian faith. Brother Don is but one fine example of many stellar scientist-believers who are religious Sisters, Brothers, and priests or dedicated laypersons. Science in service of society; science in service of faith; faith enriching scientific minds and hearts.

Our readings and our psalm all mention suffering, sorrow, and the shadow of death. Don lived the lonely experience of an only child whose parents both suffered from dementia at the end of their lives. His father died comparatively young, but his mother lived many long years in nursing care. Don visited her faithfully, sometimes bringing along other Brothers or novices for company. It seems to me that Don lived the second half of his life under the cloud of worry that a similar fate awaited him. His gradual decline in health, the limitation of his ability to work the gardens and grounds of Mount Saint John, and his eventual move to Siena Woods were true sufferings for him.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

At times, Don’s preaching took on the strident and shrill tone of a lonely prophet preaching the downfall of the nation. Later in life, his calls for extremely simple living for the sake of the planet were sometimes more austere than his fellow Brothers could live by, or at least, were willing to live by. After awhile, even the sympathetic and mostly-converted choir gets tired of listening to the prophet.

Yet, we will fondly remember Don for his quick wit, his good humor, his ready laugh, his willingness to be teased, for his faithful friendship and his

mentoring of others; for popcorn in the evening. Even when he was frustrating, it was hard not to love Don. There was no malice in him. He was genuine, transparent, himself through and through.

We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

With Don's death, we who remain experience another painful wound in in this terribly long season of grief. Don is the ninth Brother to die in Dayton since August; six of those from COVID; Don's death was complicated and hastened by COVID. The Siena Woods Community walks in the valley of the shadow of death; so does the Sawmill Community; and now the Meyer Hall Community. There is groaning in the Province and in the Marianist Family. Our nation has fresh wounds to groan and grieve this week: the fabric of our fragile democracy continues to be deliberately pulled apart y some; overtly violent white-supremacists are praised from the highest office-holder in the land while mostly peaceful black protestors of racial injustice are vilified. Nation and world struggle with what they see happening in our country. Nation and world struggle with the grief of a global pandemic and the restrictions and the health challenges it brings.

Yet in extremely difficult times like these it becomes terribly clear: intelligent Christians believe that our true hope lies in the saving work of God in our midst, not simply on our own efforts, no matter how good. In both life and death we trust in the mercy of God, which comes to us most clearly in the passion and resurrection of

Jesus Christ. Our groaning and grief is real, but it is not the final story. It is not the real end.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing  
Compared to the glory to be revealed for us.  
For creation awaits with eager expectation  
The revelation of the children of God;  
For creation was made subject to futility,  
Not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it,  
In hope that creation itself  
Would be set free from slavery to corruption  
And share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Creation itself: you, me, politics, religion, governments, societies – will be set free from slavery to corruption. Creation itself: human beings of all shapes, sizes, colors and abilities; animals; plants – lots of them; rivers, trees, hills, rocks, insects, oceans, microorganisms; the Earth, planets, stars, the universe – will share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

“On that day, the desert and the parched land will exult;  
The steppe will rejoice and bloom.  
They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. ...  
Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened:  
Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, who comes with vindication;  
with divine recompense to save you.”

It takes a great deal of trust in God; of the gifts of faith and hope to believe that our present suffering can be redeemed; that the desert and parched land can rejoice and bloom with abundant flowers.

I was a novice the year that Interstate 675 was being built, before it was opened. The back of this property had been stripped bare by a construction company that purchased gravel from the moraine at Mount Saint John for use in building the highway. Between the tree line and the highway, there was a flat stretch of barren gravel, followed by a steep, empty hillside of barren gravel, at the bottom of which was a flat hollow of barren gravel, and -- a puddle. Not a single blade of green. Not even a patch of soil. Don saw a native plant prairie. I saw gravel. But I was an obedient novice, so I went with Don and a number of others back to the gravel pit and he explained his vision and then he gave us various bags of seeds. He had an invisible map in his head of what should be planted where. He told us we were planting stuff like Little Bluestem and Big Bluestem and Purple Prairie Coneflower. I figured that he just got those names from Dr. Seuss. (I submit to you that **none** of you had heard of Purple Prairie Coneflower in 1985. Not even Sr. Leanne.) So, I took my handfuls of seed and followed Don's meticulous instructions which amounted to this: "Throw the seeds. Then walk away." That was it. No soil. No watering. "These are native wildflowers and grasses and they knew how to survive," he said. As I obediently threw the seeds, I said to myself, "This will never work."

35 years later I am happy to have been proven wrong long ago!

Don's work has prepared him, and us, for acts of faith and hope. We dearly need acts of faith and hope: for the church; for unity; for peace; for health; for justice, for this nation; for the unity of all nations; for the common good; for the Earth, for the cosmos. We do what we can, and trust God to bring it to completion: to

full, flourishing bloom. We use our minds and our training to serve society, to give hope for the future, to inspire faith in God.

In the transformed lush landscape from the prophet Isaiah, God promises us a highway home:

“Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water. There will be a highway there, called the holy way; no one unclean may pass over it, nor fools go astray on it. No lion or beast of prey will be met upon it. “It is for those with a journey to make, and on it the redeemed will walk.”

We all have that journey to make, and we are making it. Brother Don has taken a few really big steps ahead of us on the journey. But we are on it together, waiting for the Lord to sound the trumpet. When we finish the journey, we will join Don, and all the faithful departed in the mansion of the Lord, where Jesus prepares a room for us. And in the Lord’s own house, we will discover - with Don - that all of the rooms, every single one, face the Rising Son.

“Those whom the Lord has ransomed will return  
and enter Zion singing,  
crowned with everlasting joy;  
They will meet with joy and gladness,  
Sorrow and mourning will flee.”