

Love Remains

Inspired by John 15:9-17



Josephine said to her family gathered around her bed, "I have a Father who loves me and is calling me home." She smiled and all the wrinkles disappeared from her forehead. "Mmmmm...Mmmmm..." She added as a double exclamation. Then, without even opening her eyes, she named each person in the room. When your name came across her lips, it sounded like a song. Her rich Southern accent drew out all the vowels and added a few extra to dress them up a little. Each name trailed off into a hum, as if her memory was recalling each one's life story and taking time to appreciate them before the next name surfaced.

The last hum picked up some speed and wound its way around Josephine's breath into a gentle chorus of Amazing Grace. Josephine freed her right hand from the family heirloom quilt that covered her tired, 98-year old body, and blessed herself with the sign of the cross. "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," she prayed. Then, her knobby fingers, weathered from decades of caring for her large family and community, pointed upward. The band of gold that had not left her ring finger for more than 70 years caught a ray of sunlight and glowed.

Josephine inhaled with a rattle that signaled the nearness of her last breath. Her exhale brought a fit of coughing that took a few minutes to subside. She let out a soft, weary sigh, opened her eyes and said, "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. All you beautiful children, my angels, you will remain in my love."

Josephine's children formed a family train and one by one held their dear mother's hand, leaned down and kissed her, and promised to always love her and each other. Then, forming a circle of love, they prayed the rosary together. What peace filled the room that evening as the sun set and the world settled down for the night. By the 3rd decade, Josephine's breathing slowed a little more. They continued to pray, but sent knowing glances around the room. The time was certainly very near now. "Hail Mary, full of Grace," they prayed with such gentleness, "the Lord is with thee..."

The youngest, Caroline, burst into tears. She just couldn't bear the thought of a world without her mother. She felt trapped between letting her go to her great reward in Heaven, and holding on tighter than ever before to keep her here on Earth.

Jackie, the eldest, held his younger sister as she sobbed. Caroline sunk into her brother's chest. When the rosary was complete, he pressed the crucifix of Josephine's rosary into their mother's palm so that she might feel the cross of Christ and share in His redemptive suffering.

Jackie spoke with the authority of a first born son, "Remain in my love. Mama told us this so that her joy might be in us, her children, her angels as she calls us, and that our joy might be complete. She wants us to love each other as she loves us. Mama was always there taking care of us and all our neighbors and friends. She did everything with love. You could feel it when she hugged you, taste it when she fed you, and see it when she looked at you. She told us everything about God the Father, and how each and everyone of us was chosen by Him and appointed to go out and do good. We didn't have much, but we never wanted for anything. If she heard of someone in need, she found a way to help them. She would ask God to show her how to help and He gave her what she needed. She showed us that you don't have to have money, or a fancy job, or a big house and new cars. We must have love. Love can make you smile. Love can make you feel better. Love can make you full. Love can keep you safe. Love can keep you connected.

The children shared stories of the blessings of growing up in Josephine's house. The way she danced and sang as she cooked supper. How she always managed to sleep a little later on Mother's Day and acted so surprised when they had made a special breakfast for their mother -- even though directions for making french toast came up in casual conversation by a young, aspiring chef the night before.

The room was indeed filled with joy, love, smiles, and the warmth of the Holy Spirit. A priest paid a visit to anoint Josephine and pray with the family. Then, the room fell silent except for the slow, rhythmic breathing of their mother making her final journey home to the beautiful place the Father has prepared for her. The doctor said it could be hours still, but likely not many more. Love remained.

Thoughts filled with more memories like little movie theaters of the mind replaying life events. Like the time one was short with another because they were busy and felt their time was intruded upon. Love doesn't thrive there. And the moments when one felt deprived of attention, allowing an insatiable hunger for being needed and feeling important to prevail. Love doesn't live there. Or, the missed opportunities to reach out and make time for the lonely and forgotten. Where is love there?

And the feeling that others aren't living up to my standards, aren't doing enough, aren't living right. Being impatient, envious, agitated.....

These rememberings weren't filled with shame. Instead, they were being brought into the light. It was clarity and inspiration to do better. Josephine's final gift to her children with the grace of the Holy Spirit. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete." It really is that simple and that complicated.....love one another!

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