

Pastoral Letter
June 2009
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She loved butterflies. That was one of the things we learned about little Shayla Aston whose Memorial Service St. Paul's recently hosted. As you know, Shayla (age 4) and her six year-old sister, Shianna, were struck by a car on May 8. Shayla was declared brain dead within hours and gave organs to save the lives of eight other children. Shianna remains critical and unresponsive. Because the family had no place to gather to celebrate Shayla's life, St. Paul's opened its doors, not only to Shayla's family, but to an entire community struggling to grapple with the grief of this tragedy.

A couple of seemingly inconsequential things happened on the day of Shayla's Memorial Service – things on which I now seem led to reflect and pray. The first thing that happened is that people dressed in butterflies. Not on purpose, either. Well, yes, there were some things we did do deliberately. We asked Jan Frieden to decorate the church with purple and yellow flowers and with butterflies – our attempt to honor Shayla's memory. But we didn't tell people how to dress. I was amazed at the number of people who came to me during the luncheon to tell me that they felt led to put on clothing that either had butterflies stamped on them, embroidered, or sequined. They didn't understand why at the time, but after Shayla's service, they suddenly understood. Even Shelly, Shayla's mother, recognized and commented on the powerful message of rebirth that butterflies represent. And in the face of tragedy, we need to be reminded of rebirth, don't we?

The second thing happened when I visited Shayla's sister at Hospice House in Elkhart. As I walked up the sidewalk to the front door, I noticed that I had to walk carefully in order to avoid stepping on caterpillars crawling all over the place. I smiled, knowing that very soon these caterpillars would be disappearing into cocoons and beginning their transformations into butterflies. It was a little early in the year to be seeing butterflies, I knew, but the changes were going to begin happening soon. As I stood outside the door, waiting for the staff to buzz me in, I looked up at the brick wall of the building and saw something quite startling. There was a caterpillar on the wall, standing very still. Next to the caterpillar was a cocoon, attached to the corner of a brick. And next to the cocoon was a tiny light yellow butterfly, with its wings spread out across the brick to catch the warmth of the sun. How odd, I thought, to be seeing all forms of this transformation at the same time. And yet there they were, caterpillar, cocoon, and butterfly side by side,,three manifestations of the same reality. Normally, we would see these things consequentially as they occurred, but here I was being permitted a glimpse of their reality simultaneously.

Suddenly I was reminded of those words we say in the funeral liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer: “For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended.” I give thanks to the people of St. Paul's for stepping up to respond to this tragedy. The Gospel was certainly proclaimed not only in word, but very powerfully in deed and witness. This is a tragedy, yes, but our response enables us, once again, even at the grave to make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Mother Susan