

JMJ

John 10.11-16  
Rubén Rosario Funeral  
29 January 2020  
St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church  
Ridgewood, NJ  
The Rev. Andy Olivo

I speak to you this morning in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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I.

Several years ago, a friend sent me a poem that I feel is very fitting for this morning; it's titled, "Not, how did he die, but how did he live?" Listen to some of it:

Not, how did he die, but how did he live?

Not, what did he gain, but what did he give?

These are the units to measure the worth

Of a man as a man, regardless of birth.

Not what was his church, nor what was his creed?

But had he befriended those really in need?

Was he ever ready, with [a] word of good cheer,

To bring back a smile, to banish a tear?

Not what did the sketch in the newspaper say,

But how many were sorry when he passed away?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem by Anonymous author sent to me by the Rev. Suzanne Smitherman in 2011.

I was thinking about that poem this past week as I remembered Rubén. “Was he ever ready, with [a] word of good cheer, to bring back a smile, to banish a tear?” My most enduring memories of Rubén are that he was always filled with good cheer. He always greeted me with a smile on his face. He was always ready to make me laugh. When I would sit down with Rubén or find times to talk with him in the kitchen or in the hallway or in my office, there was always a warmth that just seemed to radiate from him. My predecessor, John Hartnett, said to me last week, “Rubén was one of the people I knew I could always trust and depend upon. What a remarkable man.” Dependable, trusting, kind, confident—the list goes on and on. Rubén was all of those things, which is why so many of us have been numb since we learned of his death last week.

## **II.**

I will confess that I feel a little inadequate preaching today—not because I don’t have plenty that I want to say about Rubén but because I know that so many of you knew him so much longer than I. In the days since we learned of Rubén’s unexpected death, I have heard from so many folks. Parishioners here at St. Elizabeth’s have been stunned by the news. Clergy colleagues have talked about how important he was to their houses of worship. Parents and teachers and principals at the schools where Rubén’s children attend are stunned and saddened.

And that’s not all. Members of the bishop’s staff in Newark have reached out to express their sorrow and to say what a great loss this is for our wider diocese. Our neighbors here in Upper Ridgewood have stopped in as they are taking their kids to school or walking their dogs—they’ve heard the news and want to express their

sorrow. Members of the New Jersey Choral Society who rehearse in our building throughout the week have talked to me about Rubén. All of these people have shared with me what you all know well about Rubén: He was devoted; he was loving; he was funny; he was always there to offer a hand, to offer his help.

**III.**

“Not what was his church, nor what was his creed?” The truth is that Rubén had many churches—they are represented here today. John Hartnett hired Rubén to work here at St Elizabeth’s some eleven years ago. Rubén worked at the Nursery School at West Side Presbyterian, and he took great pride in getting the rooms ready for the children there.

He liked to poke fun at me every now and again because I send my children to another nursery school in town; he would say things to me like, “Well that wouldn’t have happened if you had sent them to West Side. I take good care of all the children there.” And I have no doubt that he did. *He took good care of everyone everywhere.* My son got flu a couple of weeks ago, and the first thing that Rubén said to me, with a grin on his face, was, “Well Andy, you know that wouldn’t have happened if you had just sent him to West Side. I keep all the rooms very clean.”

He worked with my colleagues at Trinity Church in Allendale and St. John’s Church in Ramsey. Probably everyone in this room knew Rubén longer than me, yet I have the privilege, the holy and heartbreaking privilege, of saying some words about our friend, our colleague Rubén Rosario.

And here’s what I want to say: There is a gap, there is a hole in this place without him. I’m sure my colleagues from the other churches would say the same thing

about their communities as well. No doubt, Jen and the children and his family notice the large hole that Rubén once filled. Those of you who are Rubén's friends know the gap about which I speak. There's a gap in the world without Rubén in it, and we can't fill it; we can't ignore it; we don't try to cover over it. I think we're meant to recognize it, to name it, and not forget its presence in our lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran pastor and theologian of the 20th century, one wrote that "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds hard at first," he writes, "but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us...God doesn't fill [the gap]," Bonhoeffer wrote, "but on the contrary, keeps it [open] and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other."<sup>2</sup>

#### **IV.**

We're saying goodbye to Rubén today—that is what calls us together, but we're also recognizing that the good, the beneficent, the generous, the loving, the funny, the kind light that shined bright in Rubén's life is alive and it will continue to live on in us, those who know and love him. We're called together today to remember and mourn a great loss, but we're also doing something else today: We are giving Rubén back to God.

I've always appreciated the Spanish and French words for goodbye: Adios and Adieu. Both of those words are words that can be used to say farewell in a casual way, but the literal translations of a-dios and a-dieu are much deeper. Both of those words

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

literally mean “to God”. The French and Spanish languages can help us to remember that when we say goodbye to someone, especially a loved one who has died, we are sending them back to the good and loving God who gave them to us. We are entrusting Rubén back to God’s good care today. As one of my favorite prayers in the Book of Common Prayer says, “For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended”<sup>3</sup>. Life is forever changed as we say goodbye to Rubén, but his life has not ended. He lives on in your thoughts, in your hearts, in his children, in your lives, but, even more wonderfully, he lives on with God.

**V.**

Last June, a couple of months before I moved to Ridgewood to begin my work as the sixth rector here, I planned a couple of days to meet individually with all the members of the parish staff. My family and I drove up from DC that Thursday morning and when we arrived just before lunch, I walked over to my new office in the parish hall and there Rubén Rosario was waiting for me. He was to be my first meeting.

He and I sat down and talked for about an hour. I asked him to start by telling me about his family. With fatherly pride, he told me about each of his five children, the oldest to the youngest. He talked with great love about his partner, Jen. He told me about growing up in south Jersey. He talked to me about his uncle, our mailman Bill. He told me about his relationship with Ann Dowling and how important she was to him and his family. He told me about the four different churches where he worked so that he could provide for those he loved. He told me about his love of cars, fast cars, most especially, and the Pittsburg Steelers and Philly cheesesteaks. Ann Dowling reminded

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 382 of *the 1979 Book of Common Prayer*.

me this past week that Rubén hated vegetables, which is, I think, one of the reasons I love Rubén so much, for I, too, avoid a lot of leafy green things when I can.

But it's the last thing that Rubén said to me that morning that my my mind has been going to in the days since his death. As we stood to walk out of my soon-to-be office, he turned to me and said, "You look pretty young. Are you sure you can do this job?" I replied, "I think so." And he said back to me, "Don't worry. *I got you*. Let me know if you need help."

Don't worry. I got you. Let me know if you need help. I think those words sum up the kind of person that Rubén was: He was someone who was there for so many people; his family, his children, his churches, his friends, his colleagues. He was willing to help those who needed it. Like our Lord, Rubén was a shepherd, and a good one at that.

## **VI.**

The promise of Jesus the Good Shepherd is that he knows our names and when we are called home he will not forget us.<sup>4</sup> That's the hope to which I cling as we say goodbye to Rubén today: That he is at home, resting in the Good Shepherd's loving embrace.

There is a gap, a hole in this place, in our lives. And while we will never be able to fill it, we can draw strength from it, from the memory of Rubén's life well-lived. Rubén fought the good fight; Rubén finished the race; Rubén kept the faith. May God now give him peace everlasting. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See gospel reading for today's service: John 10.11-16.