

June 9, 2020

One of the first burial services that I conducted when I was a deacon assigned to Saint Peter Parish in LaPorte almost 50 years ago was for a baby who died at birth. The burial was in Pine Lake Cemetery on a very snowy New Year's Eve early afternoon with snow drifts waist high in some places.

The baby's mother was still hospitalized, and the service was in the funeral home. It was a starkly human experience, maybe my first starkly human experience.

The tiny coffin, the grieving father and grandparents, the blowing snow, and that little hole in the ground where we left that baby. I know some of you know that experience far better than I.

I spend a lot of time in cemeteries both in my work and in my leisure. They are places that call for hesitation in assigning purpose and value as we know that they are burial grounds for our dead but what are they to us, the living?

For some they are the "places" where their loved ones are, and people visit and care for those "places" as long as they can and then they cannot.

That grave is a place to put grief and love, a physical location to enact a ritual of attention and attendance, a sacred space, for many believers and unbelievers alike.

While I spend hours among the graves of strangers, I rarely visit the graves of my parents or grandparents and I only do that when I am in a cemetery to take care of someone else's loved ones.

My mother dutifully cared for the graves of her parents and my dad's parents but did not want anyone as she said it, "traipsing out to a cemetery twice a year to do flowers" and she did not want those "godawful grave blankets at Christmas."

So, I don't, and I make no judgment on those who do, please know that.

Dean Church Cemetery in Edinburgh is a museum of graves, majestic architectural monuments in many cases to the wealth and power of people

who are remembered by no one. These monumental graves to churchmen and pioneers in medicine and military success are maintained by municipal authorities because they pose a danger to visitors as they have become fragile and unstable over the years.

In Edinburgh cemeteries that are no longer affiliated with an active congregation or an active crematory, the grave monuments are toppled and left as ruins with years and years of oak leaves accumulating over them waiting until some future time when that land within the city boundaries will become useful and no one will be left to object to building whatever is to be built in that place which like all cemeteries has known so many days of sadness and grief and which became a repository of the remains of so many who worried and wanted, fretted and frolicked, loved and hated, and feared and trusted, just like we do.

As it appears and I emphasize, appears, that a new normal is arriving, I can not just let the deaths of all those many who have died and are still dying go because I need a haircut or I want to go to Mass or I want to go out to eat or I want to buy fireworks or I want to play baseball or I want to do whatever I want to do because I have a right to do it.

I find being denied what I want to do an act of faith and hope and love in a Mystery that accepts that I am more than I think I am and so are those dead and so are you.

As of now, our first Mass to which a small congregation that has indicated they want to be invited will be July 4 at 10:00 AM and it will be a Mass for the Dead of this virus, those who grieve them, and those who cared for them in life and in death; medical personnel, funeral directors, crematoria operators, and grave diggers.