

Homily for Sean Stanelun
February 14, 2010

There are times in life when what happens is so sudden, so random, so wrenching and grief causing that it simply does not, simply will not fit into whatever preconceived notions we have of how the world is supposed to run, of what is right or fair or proper. When such things happen any effort to force them into some pattern of meaning or purpose more often than not only makes things worse and leads us further from the truth, rather than closer to it.

That is why I am here today to tell you solemnly not to try that with the death of Sean Stanelun. Do not try to figure out how that death fits into some Grand Plan God has. There may be some strange sort of comfort in suggesting that “everything happens for a reason” or that “God needed him more than his family” because after all such ideas create the impression that life isn’t random after all, and that therefore life really does make sense all the time, no matter what. Those of us who want to be of comfort, who want to make life make sense not just for Dawn’s sake, but for our own, will perhaps be tempted to do that, not realizing that such formulations turn God into a horrible monster, and Sean into a cipher, without any value of his

own. Neither of those things is true; no matter how badly we want to make this all make sense, God is not a horrible monster and Sean was not, is not a cipher without value of his own. So don't do that, don't try to make sense of this in that way.

More important than this is the truth that once we abandon the futile and dehumanizing effort to figure this death out, to fit it into some scheme of God's, we become open to discovering the larger truth that God does in fact have a Grand Plan, and always has. It is a plan outlined in the religious literature of every tradition I know of; in our own Jesus summarized it this way: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." That is the Grand Plan, folks, to learn to love, because love is what gives existence meaning and purpose, love is what creates life and gives it direction, and that has nothing to do whatsoever with God controlling or predetermining everything that happens. It has nothing to do with God deliberately causing hurricanes or sickness or death, and everything to do with God being present in and through the love we bear for one another in the midst of the random events that characterize life as we actually experience it, events which sometimes

delight us, and sometimes leave us bereft and grief stricken. Love, in other words, is in the end, what makes life make sense in the only way that life finally can be made to make sense.

So the question before us is not how to fit this particular illness and subsequent death into some artificial scheme we have created in order to protect the illusion that somehow we understand God and the universe; the question is whether or not we respond to what happens in life in a way that brings us closer to love, teaches us more about it, helps us understand its value and importance, and of course leads us more completely into the experience of it. For us today, for us the living, the question is how do we respond to this death? What happens to us as a result of this illness and this death? How does it affect our ability to love?

We know how Sean's illness affected him, for he told us. He said more than once that were it not for his love and devotion for Dawn and Fiona and Finley he might well have just said "enough is enough" and stopped fighting, stopped working to get better. But he would not do that, precisely because of that love, of that devotion. He had just over four months to test the limits of his love and devotion to his family, and what he discovered is

that his love and devotion had no limits; there was nothing he would not do to get better so that he could go back and begin again to live with his family. That illness - that sudden, random, fluky illness - forced him to seek the very limits of his own capacity to love, and no matter how far it pushed him he had that much love and, as it turned out, more.

So those who are tempted to say, as we often do in such cases, that he lost his battle with this illness might want to rethink that. In the end he died, but he didn't lose the battle for what life is all about, he didn't lose the battle for what gives life meaning and purpose and direction. He won that battle, he won it completely. He lived into God's grand plan for all of us in a way that we who watched, we who waited, we who hoped and prayed, can only admire, and, I trust, learn from and be inspired by.

So here is our task, laid out before us. It is to do what Sean did, to test ourselves, to take up the rest of our lives as he took up the rest of his, by continuing to learn to love, and in so doing honor his legacy as we fulfill that Grand Plan that God has for all of us. What makes this task hard is of course the grief that we all, in varying degrees feel. But, as Nancy Copeland-Payton has pointed out in her recent book *The Losses of our Lives:*

“The only way to embrace the rest of our lives is to journey completely through this valley of grief.” That is a holy and blessed task. And if it teaches us to love more deeply, to forgive each other and ourselves more fully, then it will be time well spent. For it is where God is in all this, it is after all the only Grand Plan there is.