

Of spiders and eternity

As we see the leaves changing each autumn, we're reminded that all of that beauty is as a result of the leaves dying. November is a liturgical reminder of death. The first day of November we honor the saints who passed through death to eternal life. The second day, in a special way, but the whole month, in general, is devoted to praying for the departed.

We humans struggle with death. We grieve the loss of loved ones and beloved pets. We are challenged by the mystery of death. Thomas Jefferson, facing his final days, spoke of being ready for the "final adventure" - "untried by the living and unreported by the dead."

Most of nature seems to accept death with equanimity. I don't hear falling leaves protesting: "I don't want to die!" Cats seem to face death stoically, symbolically pulling away from us and each other.

We humans are both blessed and cursed with a cerebral cortex. We have the power to think, to give meaning to the events of our lives. We can give death an awful ending, focusing on its finality and our personal oblivion, and face death with fear and trembling. Or we can focus our minds on the One who passed through death and assured us of a place beyond death in His Father's mansion.

Our finite minds just can't grasp ultimate realities, like God, and the mystery of life and death. Ultimately, in the face of death, we surrender to trust, to a faith in a good God who promises good things to those who love God and each other.

That life is limited, however, can teach us to respect the sacredness of life. The words of the psalm are still true: "Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty for those who are strong." True, more and more people are living beyond those markers. More and more reach the age of 100 each year. With better health and nutrition, there are projections that in the decades ahead we might live to 150 or more.

But no scientist predicts that flesh and blood can ever live forever.

Our longest life is like a shooting star across the night sky in comparison to the millions and millions of years during which our universe has been evolving. Thus I have learned a humble respect for the lives of other creatures. I've always "braked" for squirrels and other creatures in the road. But I've even learned a new tolerance for flies and spiders. During a few days of vacation, there were a number of flies buzzing around, and an occasional harmless spider. In my younger days I would have swatted the flies and killed the spiders. Since they were essentially harmless, I put up with the annoyance. It's one thing to shorten their lives for safety reasons. It's another to shorten their lives for my convenience.

Years ago, I had read that the great humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, who spent his years saving lives in the jungles of Africa, reached a point late in life where he would not even kill bacteria! That was probably good for the bacteria, but not so good for some of his patients. But as we age, we see both the interconnectedness of all life and the sacredness of all life, and are reluctant to impose our judgment on what lives should end.

One final story in closing. Many years ago I was unpacking in my Retreat Master bedroom at St. Joseph's-In-The-Hills in Malvern, Pa. I spotted a big spider - a Daddy Long Legs! I was chasing him, intent on killing him. However, the spider sped across the wall to a crucifix and hid in the arms of Jesus. I spared that spider's life.

In that moment, the spider became my teacher. In its hour of need, it had run to Christ. In my hours of need, I have not always done that. It's easy to get lost in our fears and worries and anxieties. But in the face of death, and in the face of life's heartbreaks, Jesus is the only one to run to. We can make our own the words of St. Peter in the Gospel: "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life!"