

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
Homily in Thanksgiving for the Life of Nate Pierce
9.12.26

I don't know how to die.

I don't know how to die. This is what Nate told me, told his family, a while back, during one of his hospitalizations. I had called him the evening before to check in, and he was expressing gratitude for his life, his family, all he had been given. He was ready, he had said.

I heard all these statements and told Nate I would be there the next morning to see him. Unless you need me sooner, I said pointedly.

When I came into the hospital room the next day, Nate was so apologetic for making me come out for a false alarm! His doctor was in the room, and she seemed abashed as well. It seems Nate had interpreted something she told him to mean that his death was imminent. Then he uttered the sentence which was to become a sort of motto for the final months of his life.

I don't know how to die.

If this statement were true, it seems like it was the only thing Nate didn't know how to do. From his work as a physician, to caring for his family, to housing and caring for students in Geneva, to his presence in this St Martin's community, Nate seemed to be able to do everything, to do it exceptionally well, to do it with care, and to do it with utmost humility. How many of us at St Martin's knew, for example, that Nate got a lifetime achievement award for oral rehydration treatment he developed during his years in Kolkata?

There was clearly a strong force keeping Nate going, keeping him working and achieving at such a high level. Something powerful that was sustaining and fueling Nate. Some would call it integrity. Some would call it faith. Another word for it is love.

Love. Nate's love for Diane, his love for Shanti and Chris and Matt and his grandchildren, his love for children who were suffering anywhere on the planet, his love for God. Love was what fed Nate, pulled Nate, drew Nate throughout his life.

Paul writes to the community of Corinthians, Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Nate practiced this kind of love. A love that is deep and abundant. A love that grows. A love where the more we give it away, the more of it there is.

A love that gives in service to the world, and is also a very present husband and parent. A love that chooses to keep the doors open to young people, after the children have grown and moved out. A love that had Nate marching in the streets with his rolling walker. A love that showed up to be a confirmation sponsor, taking care to make the oxygen in his tank last so that he could hold up his hand in blessing with others gathered that day. A love that so wanted to be here in this space, worshiping on Sunday, and was so filled with joy and gratitude when he reached that goal.

Nate's love was always reaching, always connected, to something bigger, to God who is love, God who loved Nate and who loves each of us more than we can imagine.

This is the big love that was the source of Nate's vitality, his aliveness, his strength, his tenderness.

It is a love that keeps a person awake, that doesn't allow them to be held back by their thoughts and fears, that doesn't allow them to walk by the beaten man by the side of the road. The love Nate carried inside him and with him all the time made him look, made him stop, moved him with compassion, and made him act.

I don't know how to die, Nate told us. But actually, he did know how.

Because this same big love, the love that drove him to respond, to take every invitation from God as an adventure and gift, that same love moved Nate to accept the invitation to be cared for as his limitations increased. To accept the helping hand from a stranger, from many strangers, some of whom became friends and chosen family.

As Nate took love's invitation, as he said yes to the unusual role for him of the man who needed help in our Gospel story, as he let others show care, as he let himself accept even his limitations as gifts, he was being shown the way forward to the next place, the next phase for him. To that mystery of whatever happens after we die, that in the end he didn't need to know or do anything more than keep loving and keep saying yes.

We don't know where Nate is now. Or maybe, kind of, we do. Nate is now pure love, he is one with that big force that filled and animated him his whole life. He is in the memories and the laughter at a family joke. He is in the care of his children for their children. And he is in many other places too. In kind words coming from a stranger. In the laughter of children playing in a cemetery in Geneva. In the love of children now grown in Kolkata, with grandchildren of their own, thanks to the work Nate did.

This is just a glimpse of Nate's resurrected life. We cannot even begin to imagine all of it. Maybe, over time, with God's help, we will see more.

I don't know how to die. In the end, Nate didn't need to know anything. And yet, he was also right. He was right, because as Paul says to the Corinthians, Love never ends. He was right, because a big Love like Nate's cannot die.

Nate, we are grateful to have had you in our life. We miss you. We love you. We pray in the days to come to feel your spirit, to hear your voice, to sense that love that is your presence here in the kingdom of heaven surrounding us. May we be awake to that love, and may it move us to go and do likewise. Amen.