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Justin Somers Matthews

In September of 1967, my family moved to Little Rock, because my father had been elected bishop. Our new home was at 1809 Beechwood Avenue. The week we moved in, maybe the first day, two boys from the neighborhood stopped by to welcome me to town. It was Bill Eberle and Hal Matthews. That fall, we were all starting seventh grade at Pulaski Heights. Those two would show me the ins and outs of life in Little Rock.

Bill introduced me to some girls, because he always had one or two left over. Hal taught me how to smoke. So the first thing I learned was that life in Little Rock moved fast.

I spent many nights, that first year, in the Matthews home. I was there the night Martin Luther King was murdered. I remember Betty Matthews, Hal's mother, crying.

That's how I met Somers—as Hal's big brother. Somers was just a little older, and that much bigger, that much faster—a ninth-grade man about town. In the 7th grade, one's friends' big brothers are to be admired, emulated, and feared. Somers got all of that from me. From a respectful distance, I watched him and took notes.

I will always be grateful to Bill Eberle and Hal, the Matthews family, for welcoming this stranger.

In the summer of 1990, I moved my family back to Little Rock. I had come home to start a church, St. Margaret's. On All Saints Day, Nov. 3, 1991, we held our first service at the Market Street Bargain Cinema. Not long after that, came Somers. He arrived with two handsome sons, Baucum and Justin, in tow, and an adorable daughter, Alice. Somers brought his family to the bargain cinema to learn about, and worship, Christ—a savior to admire, emulate, and love.

Those were the years when I came to know Somers Matthews as a man. You can believe me when I tell you that he was an important leader of the church. Somers and Leslie Heisman chaired St. Margaret's first capital campaign, the one that got us out of the movie theater, and into a beautiful church building. He was always helpful, always fun. I counted on him, and he never let me down.

I will always be grateful to Somers for all that he gave and did for St. Margaret's, and for me. He is dear to me—you can believe that too.

In 2004, my family and I moved back to Little Rock, having been away again for several years as I worked on my doctoral degree. I returned to St. Margaret's in a new role. This time, Somers wasn't there. I would see him around town occasionally and he would catch me up a little bit on his life and times. The reports were always interesting, unusual—but unusual was nothing new for Somers. He said he was happy, but it was hard to tell. I worried about him some; probably, we all did.

Somers's death is the second recent, unexpected death of one of the early leaders of St. Margaret's. Marie Milwee died in April. Marie always kept a file that said "in case of death," which included some instructions for her funeral. One of her instructions was that there would be no eulogy, homily or sermon.

Marie was an old-school Episcopalian, and she knew that in our church the tradition had long been not to have anyone, even a priest, speak at funerals. She understood that this tradition was grounded on faith, the faith that we are saved through divine grace, rather than by our own accomplishments in life—or even those qualities of character through which grace is us may from time to time become evident to others. Nor are the words any of us may say adequate to the full reality of the life now ended. Marie believed that, and she was right.

Truly, no words are adequate to the full reality of Justin Somers Matthews, a reality that now irrevocably includes a terrible last moment, a grievous ending.

Last summer, not quite twelve months ago, I was asked to speak at the funeral of a young man, the son of good friends, who had also committed suicide. This young man and Somers had other things in common, including I think similar challenges and pain. Part of their pain, I imagine, was a sense of being a burden to their loved ones. In the midst of his anguish, the young man's father kept hearing in his head the lines from Don McLean's song, "Starry Night." "You took your life, as lovers often do." The repetition of this lyric had moved this father to conclude that, in some sense, his son had meant his death as an act of love.

At that funeral, in a Catholic Church, my words were about drug addiction, suicide, hope, and love.

I think that some of those words, concerning suicide and hope, will bear repeating, so here they are.

Our friend's death was not accidental, and I have some brief words to say concerning suicide.

There was a time in the not so distant past when the Christian Church may have needed to be reminded that, while suicide is a sin, it is a forgivable sin. I believe it was the case that my church withheld Christian burial from those who died by their own hand. That withholding represented a failure on my church's part, with respect to faith, and hope, and charity. I am glad I can assure you that my church no longer errs in that direction. I

will also tell you that I heard the family asking Sister Deborah Troillett to clarify the position of the Catholic Church, and she replied without an instant's hesitation: "God's mercy trumps everything." To that, I can only add: "Amen."

We may have arrived at a time when there is call for everyone to be reminded that, while suicide is a pardonable sin, it is still a grievous one. Sins, according to St. Augustine, are misguided choices in the human search for happiness. If I am contemplating suicide, the happiness I seek is release from pain. But to choose death also represents a failure with respect to faith, and hope, and charity.

By God's grace, our friend's father was given the line from "Starry Night": "You took your life as lovers often do."

I accept that there was love in his son's motivation. Of course he loved his parents, brothers, friends and wanted happiness for them. He saw his addiction as their burden, and here was a way to offer them release. That was love, but it was love distorted by an impaired will and cloudy judgment. It was love, but not the love they wanted. Love can do better, and it should.

A word now, concerning hope.

"Hope springs eternal" for good reasons. Even as a force of nature, hope runs strong in human beings. I enjoyed the Arts Center's "World of the Pharaoh's" exhibition. I saw it twice. Judging from their artifacts, in the face of death the Pharaoh's world was filled with hope. The afterlife seems almost to have been taken for granted in that society.

I have a theory about that, which occurred to me on my second walk through the exhibition. My theory is that vivid, near death experiences were common then, as they are common now, and these had been shared, accepted, and incorporated into a worldview where earthly life is just one stage within a continuing reality. In other words, I think there was more beneath those ancient hopes than wishful thinking.

I'll never forget the first man I knew who talked to me about his experience of death. This was in Fort Smith, about twenty-five years ago. The man had been a long-time addict and alcoholic, who could find no solution to his problem. In despair, he finally took a gun and fired a bullet into his head. Medically, he died, but only briefly. In that time, he had an experience of heaven. When, against the odds, he was revived to life, he had been utterly transformed. By the time I met him, he was one of the most solid, happy, faithful human beings I have ever known.

The pure hope that springs eternal comes with the gift of God, to us, in Christ.

Christians remain hopeful in the face of the reality of evil, even when evil gets the better of us sometimes. This is because the gospel gives us to expect that, in this life, we will encounter evil. We read the New Testament and find the powers of darkness evident at

every turn. We also see that, fierce as they are, they have met more than their match in Jesus Christ. "The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

Somers Matthews is the author of what still ranks in my book as the all-time worst restaurant decision ever. This happened back in the day, on a Maundy Thursday after church. That night, Somers had brought a guest, whose name was Stormy. Stormy had been released that day from prison, where he had been held since his early teenage years in juvenile detention. On Somers's initiative, St. Margaret's had promised to help Stormy with his continued rehabilitation and readjustment to life in the outside world as a free and responsible, now grown-up man. So, on the day of his release, he came to church. After the service, Somers came up to me and said, "Chris, let's take Stormy out for his first good meal." "Sure," I said, "where to?" Don't worry about that, said Somers, I'm surprising Stormy. Stormy was listening closely, licking his chops—which he continued to do right down to the moment when Somers sat him down in front of the Mount Fuji Sushi Chef, and Stormy found himself staring a platter of something that definitely was not what he had been dreaming of all those years in prison. I don't believe that I have ever seen a facial expression with quite that blend of amazement and chagrin. That is another Somers memory to cherish.

I trust you take the deeper point.

I guess that I have known a few other people of Somers's ilk and station in life who would so extend themselves to help a young ex-convict make a fresh start, but not that many. Somers jumped into that project, as was his wont, with both feet and open arms.

God love him.

God forgive him.

God bless him.

From all evil, from all sin, from all tribulation, Good Lord, deliver him. Give him joy and gladness in your kingdom, with your saints in light.