

Mother Mary Ann Hill

Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of your faithful people.

Thank you all for being here today.

I expect, like me, you feel privileged to be here to honor Damon and support Ellie and Kira and Tine and their families, but wish that the circumstances were different.

I know at funeral or celebrations of life or what have you, we typically expect a eulogy. But I am called at this moment to preach the Gospel. But I promise, this will not be overly long, I will not be issuing an altar call, and I don't assume that all of our guests believe exactly like our regulars here do. Episcopalians are a "live and let live" group of people, so we welcome people of all faiths and none.

Now, if I were doing a eulogy, I might talk about Damon's academic achievements – his undergraduate degree from Princeton, or his PhD from Dartmouth, or his two years teaching at Yale before being recruited to come to Los Alamos.

I might talk about all of the boards and committees he served on. How he was a director of the National Nuclear _____ Museum, how he served for years on the Oppenheimer Committee.

I might talk about how Damon was the head of the Physics Division. How, when he was asked if he could take on a few employees being laid off from another division, he found a place for 21 people. How it was his people that mattered most to him, not his personal advancement. That's why he did things like strive for equal pay for female scientists. I might talk about how Damon knew Hans Bethe and Edward Teller. I could tell you about his work on the Strategic Defense Initiative, thereby playing a role in ending the Cold War. I could tell you how, in the mid-80s, he managed, despite all kinds of odds and roadblocks, to convince Chinese officials to let him visit their LAB.

There is so much to say about Damon's career and achievements – so much for his family to be proud of.

People outside of his family have been talking to me about Damon for almost three weeks now. People from all walks of life have told me about how much he meant to them and how much he will be missed. Even the guy in the copy shop yesterday made a point to tell me that.

Interestingly, what people keep saying to me isn't so much about the things that normally go into eulogies. No, what I have heard over and over, is how special Damon made people feel. How he connected with them. How he encouraged people. How he SAW people. To say that someone "sees me", in current parlance, means that you are recognized beyond a superficial level. That the real you is seen and acknowledged and appreciated, in all that individuality that makes each person unique.

Seeing someone, in the way that Damon saw people, goes beyond the formulaic "how are you?" Most of us tack on a "how are you?" after saying "hi," but we aren't really looking for a genuine answer. Mostly we are expecting the person to say "fine" and move on.

But not Damon. Damon really took a genuine interest in people. He cared. He connected. And he was curious.

Now we should expect that a scientist must by nature be a curious person. I mean, science starts with questions. And Damon was curious. Ellie told me that one of things that happened on their many hikes, was that Damon was always looking for interesting things. And sometimes those things were far below the path. "Hey Ellie, look at this!" he'd say, and sometimes that meant looking over the edge from dizzying heights.

Sometimes people who are dying tell me that they are looking forward to finding out what's next. Some people, despite how they feel about the dying part, look at this journey into large life as a great adventure. Steve Jobs, also a curious guy, is reported to have said, when the end of his life came "OH WOW! OH WOW!" " I can imagine the same thing coming from Damon.

With people, Damon was, to quote Ted Lasso and Walt Whitman, "curious, not judgemental." And that, I think, is a lot of why he was able to really see people.

I had a friend once who used to say that he tried to see the face of Christ in every person he met. I really admired that, but honestly, I found that a lot harder to practice than my friend did. A lot of people are really wonderful. And a lot of people are real turkeys. Often both at the same time. So, since I couldn't muster myself to do what my friend did, I thought instead, I could try to see people the way Jesus saw them.

Because here's the thing: every person that Jesus looked at was someone he really SAW. And, despite the warts or turkey feathers or whatever, Jesus loved them. Every single person. Whether it was the

woman at the well who had things she was ashamed of, or a blind beggar at the side of the road, or a frustrated fisherman, or a tax collector who was a pariah in his community, Jesus saw people. And he loved them, each and every one, despite their flaws and failings. And in doing that, Jesus showed us how much God loves us.

I realize that for some of us here, faith is a fraught thing. There are a lot of people in the world who have been turned off by or even hurt by religion. And I'm sorry about that. And there are others who think of it as a benign thing but something that belongs in category of things like the tooth fairy – a nice idea but with no basis. And I'm afraid when we are talking about Christianity, practitioners are not always the best representatives of our chief role model. Practicing what Jesus preached, if we try to do it all, is so HARD.

Damon, a life-long Christian – and cradle Episcopalian (that's a long and interesting story – how a group of Italian immigrants in Hoboken converted to the Episcopal Church en masse – a story for another time) not only practiced what Jesus preached but he did it beautifully. Damon saw people and he loved them. There are SO many things that people use to judge others, and Damon didn't let those things stand in his way. Sure, he had opinions and preferences, but with the people he encountered, He was curious, not judgmental. I've seen him in action. He genuinely cared about all kinds of people, many of whom were very different from him.

And that is a rare thing our current world that is increasingly polarized. Most of us try to stay in our bubbles and bunkers and silos or whatever. Not Damon. Together with Ellie, they befriended so many people, from all walks of life, treating each one like their neighbor – the ones that Jesus wanted us to love like ourselves.

Someone told me in these last two plus weeks “you always knew Damon was the smartest guy in the room, but he didn't act that way.” I believe that, because I've seen it. In my nearly 35 years of lay and ordained ministry, I have NEVER known an octogenarian who's passing was mourned by so many young adults and teenagers and even little kids. And these are kids aren't relatives – they are fellow church members or neighbors or friends' kids and grandkids.

Why? Because Damon saw them and recognized them, not as young people of no consequence, but persons who had value in their own right. Do you know how rare that is? Damon was never too busy, or too self-important, to give young people his full attention.

That interest in others, young and old, is what made Damon such a great mentor. A lot of people on his level look out mainly for number one. Damon was always concerned about improving the lot of everyone around him. He was always concerned about encouraging and building up others. That's what he loved about being a division leader – it gave him the opportunity to bring people along – to help them grow. Again, that's a rare quality in this day and age.

At the beginning of this sermon, I told you we weren't having an altar call. But I may have fibbed a little, because I do have a request. Next time you are tempted to write someone off, or to ignore them, or let yourself be alienated. Next time you are too busy to really see the person in front of you. Next time you feel the urge to rush to judgment - – please try to be like Damon. See people. Notice them. Pause long enough to acknowledge that there is someone in front of you who is worth your attention. Someone that deserves your attention and empathy. Be kind, Be curious, be encouraging.

I ask this because I'm pretty sure that if we can be a little more like Damon, we are going also be a little more like Jesus.

*Life is short, and we do not have
much time to gladden the hearts of
those who travel with us, so be swift to
love and make haste to be kind.*