

Funeral Homily  
For  
EMERY RICHARD TANG, OFM

In China, there is an old story about two earthen jugs that a water bearer carried to the master's house each day. He would loop the handle of each over a pole across his shoulders, fill them at the river and carry them up the mountain path. Now – one of the jars was badly cracked. It had a crack down one side that caused it to leak half of its water before arriving at the master's house. The defect was plain to see, but the water bearer did not discard the jar. He was careful to put it on a different side each day to ease the ache in his back caused by the uneven load. Because of its poor performance, the cracked jar felt inferior to the sound jar. It was ashamed of how it wasted the efforts of the water bearer.

After years of daily trips to the river, it could no longer keep silent. One day it said to the water bearer, "I am so sorry for my flaw. It is unfair that you work so hard and only get the result of half as much work because of my imperfection. You should find another jar that is as sound as my companion so your efforts are not wasted". The water bearer walked on in silence for awhile and then said, "You should not compare your work to the work of the other jar. I need both of you to accomplish the master's work. I know of your imperfection and have put it to good use".

As they made their way up the mountain path that day, the water bearer pointed out the beautiful flowers that grew on each side of the path. He went on to say,

For many years nothing would grow here. The soil is dry and no one could take the time to provide water for plants to grow. But you have found a way to nourish the flowers that takes no extra work. You please the master not only with the water you bring to his house, but the water you spill along the way which has given us this garden of beautiful flowers".

In the beginning God's design for all of creation was as perfect as the sound jar in our story: there were no cracks in God's jar. God's vision for humankind was perfect and precious. God did not make suffering, pain, sickness, and death. God fashioned all of creation to be life giving and worthy of God's loving touch.

However, weak water bearers came along and damaged God's creation just as the cracked jar had been damaged. What was once a beautiful piece of pottery now had a bad crack. Where there was once light and life, now there was darkness and death. Where there was once hope and love, now there was despair and hate. So creation was damaged and we seem at times to be like that cracked jar of the water bearer: futile, useless, and wasting.

But God's intention did not waver; God's intention remained the same. God intended that our jars would be whole – that our jars would produce life. God did not make death. God did not put the crack in the jars of our life. Nor was God content to sit back and allow death to have the final word, to have death drain us of all life. In other words, no way was the crack in our jars going to make us useless and wasteful.

Something would have to happen to that cracked jar to make it a beautiful piece of pottery again. And so the God-man named Jesus was born into the world as one of us, to experience suffering and death from the inside. But from Jesus' death, from the crack in Jesus' jar, God would fashion something new for the human race and for all of creation. Jesus then would use death itself-the crack in the jar-to give life, everlasting life. From Jesus' jar, flowers would be watered and blossom. So Jesus did not abolish death: he knew he would die; he knew he had to die; he was ready to die. And why? Because with his death, death would cease to be the enemy. Oh, I do not mean that with Calvary, on Calvary, death became easy; it did not. I mean that on Calvary, Christ gave death a new look, a fresh meaning.

What this new meaning is can be said quite simply: from the death of Jesus Christ, life was born, not only for him but also for us. That, which was thought to be useless and cracked, now gives life. And gardens are watered and beautiful flowers bloom for all to enjoy and to praise God.

There is a danger that each of us leave the jar of our life untouched because we fear the cracks that are there. We feel that they are too deep, too wide, too broken. The cracked jar in the parable felt sorry for the water bearer because the jar felt it wasn't doing its job. If we look at our jars and put them in the corner to collect dust, then indeed we can end up being useless; we end up wasting precious life. But through Jesus God invites each one of us to use the cracks in our jar to water the gardens of our lives to create new life, to create our own garden of flowers. Jesus used the crack in his jar to create new life and so he tells us: "Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am, there will be my servant". ( John 12:26)

Today we come together to praise our God for Emery Richard Tang's life and his beautiful garden. As you well know, Emery was a master gardener and took great pride in his flowers. In Emery's own words:

"The loveliness of flowers in my life is a constant reminder of God's marvelous creativity and never-ending thoughtfulness and care. Blossoms show me that with each "ohh" and "ahhh" I breathe, God the unseen is somewhere in the wings, smiling at my pleasure. (FFJ, p. 71)

We gather then to honor a good man who did not put his jar aside to collect dust. Rather he faithfully and constantly hauled the water of life so that he could grow beautiful flowers in his garden, which were only a sign of God's tremendous love for each of us.

Emery walked up and down the path of life for eighty-one years. That is a lot of walking. Sometimes the walk was easy for him; sometimes the path was rocky, but he never gave up; he never quit. He faithfully carried the jar of water each day of his life—spilling his life so that his garden could grow. Today let us look at that garden he watered and some of the flowers in that garden. But first, let me be clear about these flowers that I will identify. I found these flowers in his own writings, especially in his last book, *FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY*. These are the flowers that gave him the greatest joy, and he shared them with us.

The first flower in his garden is the gift of wisdom. On the occasion of his 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee as a priest, I said in my homily that of “all the gifts he had received from God and his parents, the one gift that stands out is wisdom.” This is the wisdom who hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. And God has made his Wisdom known through Emery’s life and ministry. In the Scriptures, the wise person is the expert in the art of good living. Passion does not sear him; he is self-possessed. Wrath does not wrack him; he is patient; he is cool. He is a knowledgeable man; he’s mastered a field, may even have academic knowledge, but more importantly, he is at home with his knowledge; it rests lightly yet securely upon him. Doesn’t that picture of the wise man of the Scriptures describe Emery perfectly?

It has been this gift of wisdom that has been the source of all that he has done—whether it was teaching in a classroom, sitting in a principal’s office, preaching from the pulpit, producing communications media, taking a photo or writing a book, planting a garden—all of it has been about preaching God’s Word with wisdom.

In Emery’s own words of wisdom:

**On forgiveness:** ‘those who do not forgive destroy the bridge over which they may one day need to pass’. FFJ, p. 118

**On generosity:** ‘if only there were a simple, inescapable way to be convinced that sharing my gifts and goods, not amassing or wasting them, is the key to the happiness that is so desirable but so elusive in life’. FFJ, p..54

**On life’s accomplishments:** ‘looked at with the proper perspective, I’ll never be able to accomplish all I would like to do, but I know I have all the time I need to do what God would have me do’. FFJ, p. 57

Now, in God’s own Word from the Wisdom of Solomon:

I learned both what is secret and what is manifest,  
for wisdom, the fashioner of all things taught me. (7: 21-22)

Oh, yes, wisdom is definitely a flower in Emery’s garden.

The second flower in his garden is the belief that the love of God, the love of others, and the love of self is the secret of good living. This belief was not only the heart of his teaching and preaching, but it was the heart of who he was as a man, a friar, and a priest. His message was quite simple: love is doing good to others. No strings attached. Period. He encouraged us to do good because we should want to do good. It is the motive that counts. And the good must be unilateral – nothing expected in return and that is risky business. Emery challenged us to risk love because deep down we are all afraid of being taken. And the basis of this love must be the love of Christ. He says, “I am convinced that there is only one truth – the love of Christ”. And the acceptance of that love requires a willingness to change: our attitudes, our prejudices, our opinions, our positions on all kinds of issues. Yes, love is risky business, but we should not fear. Emery took great consolation in St. Paul’s words: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come will be able to separate us from us from the love of God” (Rom 8: 38-39)

In Emery’s own words of love:

Love is God, without beginning and without end. God is all-good, forever pouring out goodness. God can't do anything else. It's impossible for God to run out of goodness and to stop giving. Conversely, it's impossible for God to do anything which is not good or which is bad. Love can only do what is good.

The amazing fact is that I am made in God's image. This means that I am created out of God's love in order to love and, of course, to be loved. The more I love then, the closer I approach to being Godlike. The result is that I share more abundantly in the beatific joy that is God's nature.

For Love to be Love, it first of all must be freely done. It can't be forced or legislated. I have to want and choose to do good for someone, starting with myself. That is the real power and beauty of love. FFJ, pp. 95 - 96.

Now in God's own Word from the Gospel of John:

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. (15:9-12)

Oh, yes. Love is definitely a flower in his garden.

The third flower I find in his garden is the commitment to a world in which there is justice for all. For the Jews of old, NOT to execute justice was NOT to worship God.

For Emery, NOT to preach justice is NOT to preach the gospel. In his preaching he would often point to the violence and division in Church history and ask, "Is this the result of Jesus' coming? I guess God is having a hard time communicating".

Therefore, he was not afraid to take on the justice issues of his day: nuclear war, the death penalty, the homeless and the hopeless, the senior abused and confused, the teenage mother hooked on coke and the teenage boy taking his gun to class, the millions too discouraged to look for work, the unnumbered hearts that harbor hate, eyes empty of hope,

stomachs bloated with hunger. Emery preached not only a gospel of hope to them, but a gospel of love about them.

One of the most poignant justice words he preached was a Telespot produced by Franciscan Communications. In this short spot, a finely dressed woman is walking up to a church in downtown Los Angeles. As she goes up the steps of the church, she passes a homeless person sitting there. She turns and gives a look of disdain. And as she is about to enter the Church, the picture freezes. Then comes the voice:

If you don't find God out here, you certainly won't find him in there". You can just picture Emery saying those words while giving that look of his that spoke volumes.

Now in God's own Word from the Gospel of Matthew:

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (25:40)

Oh, yes. Justice is definitely a flower in his garden.

Finally, the last flower I have identified is family and friendship. This is really one flower in his garden. For Emery, if you were a member of his family, you were his friend and if you were his friend, then he considered you his family. To Emery's family: you know how much he loved you and he knew how much you loved him. He was always there for you and you for him. And to his friends: you know how he prized your friendship by the way he kept in touch by word and deed.

In Emery's own words of friendship:

Without any qualification, my friend is my life's most precious treasure. Again and again, I praise and thank God for so wonderful a gift: someone who truly cares for me, anticipating and providing for my needs and who will stop at nothing to provide for my well-being, asking nothing in return...Friendship is a warm blanket

of comfort and security in which I can wrap myself during conflict and struggle. My friend lends a sympathetic ear to my travails and comforts me when I am afflicted by grief. When I embark on a new endeavor I can always count on my friend for honest analysis, advice and support. When I am underway, my friend stands by me with encouragement and honest criticism through ups and downs of any undertaking. If I veer off course or become distracted, my friend rouses me and straightens me out. FFJ, p. 46

Now in God's own Word from the Gospel of John:

And I will soon show to you and to everyone, there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friend. I have shared all of this so that you can share in my own infinite joy, and then, my beloved friend, your joy will be complete. (15:10-15)

Oh, yes. Family and friendship is definitely a flower in his garden.

Now these are only some of the flowers in his garden, watered from Emery's jar of life. But those certainly are not the only flowers. You see he has a flower for each of you. He grew it just for you. Today, look at it, appreciate its beauty, honor it, celebrate and praise God and Emery for it, and then share your flower with another.

And for Fr. Emery. Indeed there is much to mourn as there was much to mourn on Calvary. We shall have to wait for the resurrection on the last day before we see that inviting smile of his, before those sharp eyes look at us, before we hear that melodious voice with his words of wisdom and challenge. All of that is sad – no matter how profound our faith. But the thrilling truth remains: Emery is alive with God. In the presence of God, there is only God, there is only Love. In the presence of God, every cracked jar pours forth the water of life.

And we who remain? What of us? We have our memories, of course, and they are precious. But there is more, much more. Emery Richard Tang is not merely a memory, he

is part of us. He is built into our lives. His wisdom and smile, his kindness and love, his friendship and service—all have seeped into our lives. Because of him and his life as a friar and priest, we are more human, more life-giving, more blessed.

And now, finally, in Emery's own words:

And so, in these remaining years my goal is to accept the challenge to “fight the good fight” to the end, as Paul urged his friend Timothy (I Tim 6:12) Then what an enormously thrilling and wondrous moment it will be to discover the full answers to life's who, what, when, where and why. FFJ, p. 5

And now, finally, in God's own Word from St. Paul:

No eye has ever seen nor ear heard nor has any mind ever conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him.” (I Cor 2;9)

And so, Emery, my teacher, my brother and my friend, rest well as you enjoy the mansion God has prepared for you. Now it is time for you to walk in God's garden where with each flower God is saying to you, “Emery Richard Tang, I love you.” AMEN

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