

Did he go to hell?

From time to time, I get emails from people who read my column in *Gulf Pine Catholic*. Many are encouraging while others ask a question that haunts them.

Recently, I received the following email from Renee. "Hello Father Tracey, you will not remember me but I attended St Thomas in Hattiesburg MS when you were there. You met with my husband and I before we got married then you left soon after that. I enjoy reading your articles in the Gulf Pine. I always look for your article first then read the rest. So please keep them coming. I have a question I have been wanting to ask a priest and when I saw your email address at the end of your article I thought I could ask you. One of my good friends son committed suicide a couple of weeks ago. He was only 18. I saw that suicide was part of Wrath in the Seven Deadliest Sins. Did he go to hell?"

I sat down at my laptop and replied to Renee in the hope that my response might lead to some small understanding of her efforts to unravel the mystery of someone driven to suicide.

"So sad to read about your friend's son committing suicide at such an early age and his whole life ahead of him. It must be devastating for his family. I will share some thoughts that might help you understand the bigger picture. These thoughts may be in the form of more questions than answers because, first of all, there is no easy answer to such a tragedy and secondly, the questions that such raises might help us see the big picture and see it in a wider context.

I suppose the big question is why. Why would a young person with their whole life and future ahead of them commit suicide? Why would a young person on the crest of adulthood contemplate such an action?

There is no easy answer. There is no way we can get into the mind of that young 18 year old and try to decipher what led him to commit suicide. Who knows what demons were lurking within him. Was there a demon of despair? A demon of self-doubt? A demon of identity confusion? A demon of non self-acceptance? A demon of self-hatred? A demon of not feeling loved? A demon of unreal and unrealizable expectations placed on young shoulders that became unbearable? A demon of being bullied? In the dark recesses of that heart lurked demons that drove a young man over the edge. Who knows? Did that young man even know himself or could he be expected to know?

Sometimes, it is easier for us to rush to judgment. Sometimes, we are quick to conclude rather than understand. Sometimes, it is easier to simplify rather than deal with the complicated. Sometimes, it is easier to condemn rather than console; to give a flippant answer rather than live with the deeper questions.

In the past, our church was more cruel than kind; more judgmental than merciful to anyone who committed suicide. We do hope that, as a church, at least pastorally, we have grown somewhat and become less a judgmental church and more a merciful church. After all, our Founder reminded us again and again that it was mercy that he desired, not judgment.

Sometimes, we think we know people with the result that we take them for granted. Then one day or one action of theirs may surprise us or may even shock us. Then, we realize how little we know that person. We may have drawn a frame around them and felt comfortable with its design but they shatter the frame and we are left puzzled by the broken pieces of our preconceived ideas and judgments.

The same thing may have happened with the life of the young man who committed suicide. On the outside; to family, friends and neighbours, he may be seen as a very loving young man, well respected with many friends, been part of a very loving family, smart, popular, getting good grades, having noble ambitions for himself following high school and, as people say, "having his whole life ahead of him."

You ask, "Did he go to hell?" To answer it, I would like to ask another questions - "Did he go through his own hell here already?"

So, Renee, these are just some of my thoughts that might help. Maybe they are, as I said in the beginning, more questions than answers but as someone once said, we have to love the question until we discover the answer and, in the case of that 18 year old, we may never know that answer, but at least, have the courage to ask the right questions so that we might get a better insight into understanding."