



He was the life of the party. When he walked in a room, the energy level multiplied exponentially. He was the best storyteller: giving you just enough of the details to keep you on the edge of your seat without getting too bogged down in any of them. He was also the best man in our wedding, oddly enough. He gave that kind of toast that not only brought about a light chuckle from the crowd, but had them laughing so loud that it could be heard in the rest of the banquet hall and throughout the whole county. However, I also remember the night when he didn't say hardly a word. That never happened with this life of the party.

So, after all our friends had left, I asked him if everything was okay. He paused for a bit, started in with some watery eyes (which, again, I never saw from his vibrant self), and he said, "Keep this on the down-low, but my mom was just diagnosed with cancer." We were still in high school at the time. We thought we were invincible, and perhaps we were under the impression that that impenetrable aura should carry over to our immediate family, at least. Evidently not. I didn't know what to say to him. I tried to figure out the right words to bring back our life of the party, but I couldn't come up with anything. Instead, it was something along the lines of, "I'm really sorry...that just flat-out sucks."

Thankfully, his mom went on to soundly defeat the disease. She ended up finishing her career as a teacher, but she still had her own vibrant "life of the party"-ness to carry out for others. So, she went on to lead recreational activities for those in a skilled care facility, to help individuals keep the parts of their life that brought their own sense of meaning for decades. For the passionate gardeners, she would make sure there was a space outside for them to tend to flowers, for starters. Except, in recent months, she had to start taking care of a resident that was not supposed to be there anytime soon. Her own husband, at far too young of an age, was unfortunately diagnosed with a rare form of dementia, and now requires more round-the-clock care. That was not supposed to happen. They were supposed to enjoy retirement together and travel. Evidently not.

The aforementioned friend, who usually multiplies the energy level exponentially with any room he walks into, attempted to do the same with his father after he got settled into his new surroundings. But the father had reached a point in his condition that he struggled to know who exactly that young man was in front of him. When my friend told me about that, I didn't know what to say. Even a few years in seminary with some pastoral care classes and some time doing this whole pastor thing, it reaches a whole 'nother level when it hits that close to home. All the energy of hope and beauty and new life can instantly vanish for a moment. It brought me back to that night over twenty years earlier. All I could still say was something along the lines of, "I'm really sorry...that just flat-out sucks."

It would be nice to fix such hardships for our family and friends. It would be nice to ensure that our own life of the party, whoever that is, always stays that way for us to feed off of through all our days. It would also be nice to never lose the Resurrection energy that is meant to sustain us with all the hope and beauty and new life forever. But for some moments, it feels as if it vanishes completely. And yet, thankfully, we are thoroughly blessed with this God of genuine love: this God who will not only rejoice when we rejoice, but will also weep when we weep, too. This is the God not only of the empty tomb with a love so powerful that death stood no chance. But this is the God of the cross, too: with a love that insists on joining us through all the moments when we can feel so absolutely empty, as if all the energy is sucked out of the room of our own heart, as if we wonder if our own eternal life of the party went out the door and left us behind. Evidently not. This Lord of ours will not only rejoice when we rejoice. This

Jesus Christ comes into our life with a most genuine love that will also weep when we weep, and will never leave us to take on any hardship alone.

Somehow, my friend continues to more than manage to be the life of the party, multiplying the energy level exponentially. I can still tell that even if I'm not in the same room with him nearly as much anymore. Somehow, through texts and phone calls, I can still feel it. I can still feel the enthusiasm for this journey, just enough to keep me on the edge of my seat. I can still feel the hope that new life is still happening in this world, in church buildings and wedding banquet halls and care facilities as well. It's as if God just wired him that way, to be a living reminder that nothing can happen in this life to separate us from the genuine love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. As is he truly meant to be our eternal life of the most joyous party that will never stop for any of us: that not even death stands a chance against. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!