



Rev. Jack Conley

Solemn Novena July 26, 2026

As we gather this afternoon, Father Rick is on his way back to Haiti, so we keep him in a special prayer. On October 14th, 2023, the young comedian Pete Davidson was serving as host on a TV program entitled Saturday Night Live.

It was the very week that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unfolded, and Davidson began his monologue by acknowledging the difficulty of trying to be funny at such a difficult time. He offered a serious and sobering message. This week, we saw the horrible images of stories from Israel and Gaza, he began.

And it got me thinking, Davidson said, to when I was only seven years old. My dad, Scott Davidson, was a New York City firefighter who died in the attacks of the World Trade Center on 9-11. My entire world fell apart.

As an only child, my mother tried everything in her power to try to cheer me up as the weeks unfolded. He described a crucial role that comedy played in his grieving process. As one day, his mother came home with a video, mistakenly thinking it was a Walt Disney movie.

It was a recording of the standup comic Eddie Murphy. Well, after a moment or two of it playing, she realized this was not really appropriate material for an eight-year-old. And she quickly moved to remove it, when she noticed I was laughing again, for the first time in over a year.

I saw so many terrible pictures this week, he continued. Children suffering, Israeli kids, Palestinian kids. And it took me back to this horrible place in my own life.

No one in this world deserves to suffer like that, especially kids. I don't understand it. I really don't, and I never will.

But sometimes, comedy is really a way through tragedy. You know, in ancient Greek, we have those two images of masks of tragedy and comedy. I think heartbreak and humor can coexist.

You know, the word humor comes from the Latin humus. It means earth. That's where we get words like human and humility and humor.

Because all of them command that we get down to earth or back to the earth. When I was a little kid, I grew up in Chicago, and we didn't have a lot of land in the city. But in the backyard, we had what we called the humus pile.

And this was long before composting was popular. My dad would take potato peelings and eggshells and coffee grounds and other things and turn it over with the grass clippings and other yard waste. And out of this garbage comes the richest, blackest, most fertile soil you can imagine.

It's a metaphor in many ways for how redemption comes out of death. When Jesus says, unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, then it can produce great fruit.

And so Father Rick, all this week, has been talking about producing fruit. The fruit of the golden rule. You know, Thomas Aquinas, the great 14th century philosopher, theologian, had a phrase that is often quoted, quid quid recipitur, of course it's in Latin, ad modum recipientis recipitur.

It means, whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the receiver. In other words, we hear things or we see things, not as they are, but as we are. Always filtered through our own prejudices, our own experience, our own bigotries, and so on.

And so today, this afternoon, for our final novena service, I'm going to journey with you through the richness of our earthiness, our hummus. You know, as the week has unfolded, Rick and I have repeatedly lifted before you so much of the collapse of systems in our existence. Structures of authority are crumbling, religious beliefs and practice are crumbling, our politics, our faith, our ecosystem.

We're struggling, and we might step back and say, where's the good news? How can we smile? How can we be people of hope? You know, the word hope and that concept is very different from optimism. Optimism is merely what we might call wishful thinking. For example, I might wish that I win the state lottery.

Or I might wish that my beloved Chicago Cubs win another World Series this year. Now, don't be ugly. Talk about miraculous events.

But hope is different. Hope is not wishful thinking. It's what we call a theological virtue, like charity or faith.

Faith, hope, and charity are theological virtues. That means they're grounding God. A way to understand this is what Rick was talking about yesterday, moral evolution.

Because I believe God is underneath how things evolve. We call it the power of the Spirit. Now, when you use the word evolution today, you've got to be careful, because quickly it gets into the religious culture wars and creationism and Charles Darwin.

All of that. That's not what I'm talking about. Monkeys and that's not it.

Evolution is the reality that things change or develop or grow. For example, when ancient Israel left the oppression, the slavery of Egypt and the Pharaoh and moved into the land of promise, the Canaan Valley, it was not uninhabited. There were all kinds of different tribes there.

The Amorites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Termites. No, just kidding. Trying to make sure you're still awake.

The Jebusites, for example, were a very good people. They had generations of lawmaking and they had evolved with good ritual and worship. But they were a violent people and their laws declared that, for example, if you stole a loaf of bread, the victim of your crime had the right to sever your right hand.

And ancient Israel entered this violent culture saying, no, no, no, no. The severity of the punishment cannot exceed the seriousness of the crime. It's simply an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

You can't go beyond that. And after many generations, Israel's impact transformed the culture into a more tolerant and compassionate culture. It was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

One of the more complex and perplexing stories in the New Testament is when Jesus tells his disciples, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom of God. And this isn't because the Pharisees were bad men, they were very good. They were scrupulous about the law.

They were very generous. But they believed in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And Jesus says, not enough.

When someone strikes you on one cheek, you turn the other. If they ask you to give them your coat, you give them your cloak as well. If they ask for one mile, you walk with them two.

Jesus is not commanding we become victims or that we become doormats. He's asking us to go beyond. You know, it's kind of humorous.

We think we're a Christian nation here in the States. We're really not. Because we're still where we were at the time of Jesus.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And if you don't believe me, pick up a newspaper. And follow where we're at.

You see, the trouble with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is that it ends up being hurt for hurt, hatred for hatred, murder for murder, and nothing ever changes. Nothing ever

evolves. Jesus says greater things than these you will do if you evolve, if you continue to grow and change.

And that's our call. That's our vocation as followers of Jesus Christ. You see, Israel was not like other religions of their time.

Israel had what we call a prophetic tradition built into their entire system was self-criticism. In fact, half of their sacred writings are prophetic. People like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and countless others.

And the role of the prophet was to name and to expose their own group's shadow side, their own wound, their own sin. And what we see again and again is that if any movement, any government, any religion doesn't have self-criticism, it cannot be of God and you should not follow it. If any religion, any movement, any government does not have self-criticism, it is not of God.

Yesterday, Father Rick spoke of Ars Moriandi, which means the art of dying. But it's also the art of diminishment. It's the inevitability of decline.

And so I think today, rather than expend all our energy on whether America is already great or needs to be great again, assuming that greatness is not wealth management or military dominance, I think true greatness is what Rick calls the Golden Road. You know, there's a wonderful woman in London, an economist in London, a very famous writer, and she's coined a phrase called donut economics, kind of reminding us that things can't keep growing. If your children's feet keep growing, you're in trouble.

And yet we think that our stock portfolio should just be bigger and bigger and bigger. Every evening when we check it before we go to bed, we expect an increase. We expect greater wealth, greater consumption, and so forth.

That's why I think we need to get back to Earth. Back to humanity. Back to humanity.

And back to humor. I have a buddy, a priest in Toledo, Ohio, who in their parish, they had a renewal program. And the theme one night was the covenant or God's covenant.

And the task, of course, was for various parishioners to give testimony to share their faith. We Catholics aren't good at that. It's not our practice.

And he said the first guy to get up, it was a very wealthy but a very famous parishioner and CEO of a very large corporation in the city, and confident but speaking publicly about faith, not so much. And he was at the amble with the microphone and oblivious to the fact that he was clicking a ballpoint pen as he spoke, and the pen was closer to the mic than his voice. And he's going, covenant, he said.

Click, click, click, click, click, click. It's a contract. Click, click, click, click.

God's faithful to me, and I'm faithful to God. Click, click, click, click. We're both happy.

Click, click. And he sat down. The second person to get up, he said, was a very familiar face.

She was a homemaker and very active in her parish. And she said, you know, when I think of covenant, I think of how God's been faithful to me, with me over the years. I've messed up a lot, but God continues to be faithful.

And she sat down very humbly. The third person to get up was a young, a young Jesuit priest. He was just ordained a week before in that very church.

And he's in his Roman collar. And he said, you know, when I think of God's covenant, I think of back when I was a little kid, my baby sister had leukemia. I loved her dearly.

And I promised God that if she lived, I would become a priest. But she died. And very gently, the young Jesuit sat down.

And my buddy said, we began discussing at our table, what's it like when God doesn't seem to get the blueprint? You know, in Isaiah, the prophet, we hear, as far as the heavens are above the earth, so is God's love above us. You know, so many people turn to people like Abraham Lincoln as the greatest president. I find it curious that Lincoln, after he was elected, as his cabinet, chose his most bitter political opponents.

It's called the team of rivals by historian Dolores Curran. Because he realized that if he had just voices that would be yes men, there'd be no growth. There'd be no profit.

There'd be no challenge. And what we come to learn, unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it won't produce fruit. Out of all that seeming garbage comes the richest, blackest, most fertile soil, humus.

And so as we conclude our novena this year, we allow God to continue to transform us. As Augustine says, that we might become what we receive, the body of Christ. I thank you for your presence.

I ask God's blessing upon you.