

EMBRACING THE CROSS

A Joyful Imitation of Christ

by Emily Stimpson

The gravel was loud beneath my tires. Loud, but familiar. Almost there. My heart beat faster. What would I say? What could I say? I slowed the car. I was in no hurry this time.

“Help me, Brad,” I prayed. “Help me say the right things. Don’t let me say anything that will bring them more pain.”

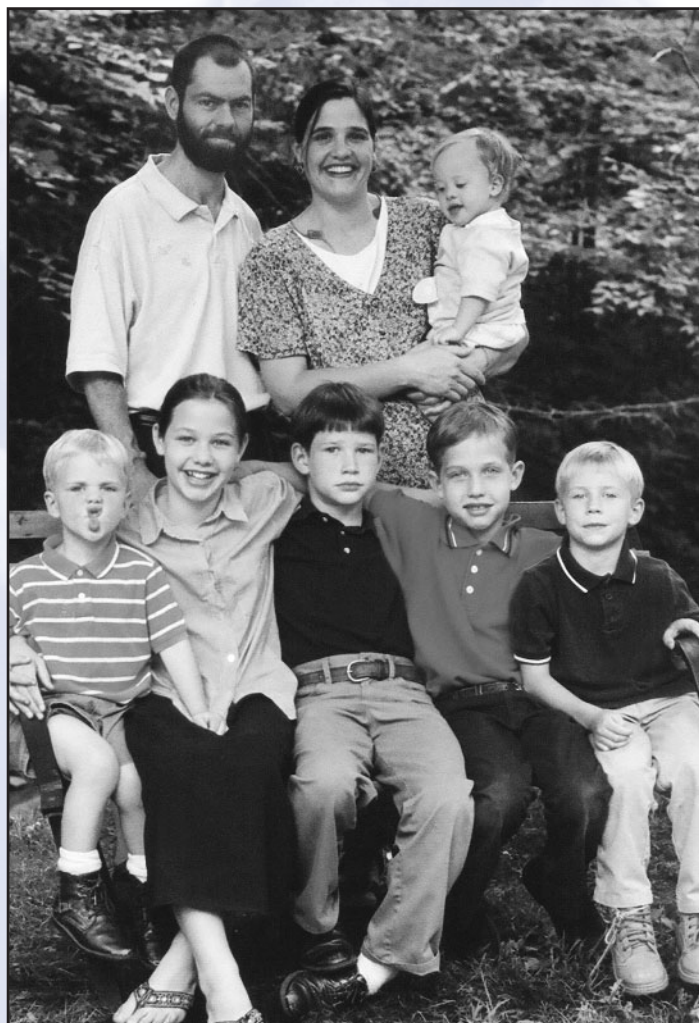
It had been three weeks since Brad Fallon’s death. This would be my first visit to the house since the funeral.

As the house came into view, my mind wandered back to early November. I saw myself on the same road, bringing my friend Victoria something she needed from town. Her husband, Brad, and their boys stood in front of the house, building a large bonfire with scrap wood from the barn. When the boys saw my car, they started waving. Joseph, their eldest son, ran into the house to announce my arrival to their mother. The other boys ran alongside my car until it stopped. I opened the door.

“Emily, we’re building a . . .” “Emily, Papa said . . .” “Emily, did you know . . .”

Three voices sounded all at once. Their words piled on top of each other. Their sentences blurred together. I smiled. I knew I would hear no break in the chatter till I drove back up the road. I loved every minute of it. It was why I came.

For over half his life, their father had struggled with a rare kidney disease. Three transplants and years of dialysis kept him alive, but the disease would not be beaten. By that day in November, unable to work and suffering from congestive heart failure, Brad knew his prognosis was grim. But, while others might have seen the shadow of death hovering over their house, inside their house, inside their world, there was no death, only life.



The Fallon family: Clockwise from top, Brad, Victoria, Ignatius, John, Louis, Joseph, Veronica, and Anthony.

Photo by Dave Matthews / www.david-matthews.net

“We don’t suffer as much as many, many other people,” Victoria would say. “And we only suffer a little bit more than some.”

She was right. In today’s world, most people will do whatever they can to avoid suffering. They’ll break any promise, betray any trust, and deny any truth if they think it will somehow lessen their pain. Ironically, in doing so, they only suffer more. Brad and his family chose a different path. They didn’t run from suffering; they stood their ground and embraced it. There, in that embrace, they found the love of Christ and His Blessed Mother. They also found joy.

Joy filled their house. It flowed from the lips of their six children, rang out in Victoria’s laughter, and abided in Brad’s steady gaze. And it was joy, not simply happiness. Rooted in Christ’s love and strengthened by Brad’s suffering, the Fallons’ joy had long existed beside sickness and poverty and had not wavered. It was the fruit of grace, not chance or circumstance.

“Our sight is weak,” Brad once told me. “Something has to happen in our life to [help us] see past the visible, past the material, or else we live superficially.”

Through his illness, Brad’s eyes found their strength. And as the years passed, he learned to welcome the pain, to rejoice in it even. Suffering became his vocation, his path to joy.

“I have been given the inestimable honor and privilege of suffering in sickness with Christ, both for my sins and those of my wife and children,” he wrote. “And in this I have always desired to find my happiness: that the secret to understanding my life might also be woven into the words of Isaiah 53.”

Brad was a suffering servant, but he hid it well. Despite his obvious frailty, Brad was a strong presence. In fact, in his presence Brad’s friends would easily forget his illness. A poet and a philosopher, Brad found the world around him much more interesting than his health, and his conversation reflected that. Few words of complaint ever escaped his lips. Instead, he talked of literature, theology, and politics.



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His wit was dry, almost biting, checked only by his deep faith. An hour with Brad was never dull.

With a deep appreciation for the beauty of creation, Brad reveled in the details of life, details that escaped the notice of most. The first frost of the season, a hot cup of coffee, his morning shower—all were occasions for delight and thanksgiving. He passed that sense of wonder on to his children, who never tired of repeating their papa’s thoughts.

Brad passed on more than just a sense of wonder though.

Last July, I interviewed Brad for an article I was writing on suffering. During the course of the interview, he told me, “Victoria and I get to teach our children something that other families don’t have the opportunity to. When you home school, part of the value is that when you open the grammar book you walk through it yourself and learn side by side with your child. And that imprints on your child not only knowledge, but also the idea that knowledge is something worth striving for. It’s fun, interesting, and important. And we get to do this everyday with this cross, this suffering. We get to walk through a difficult life

with our children and show them how to do it while learning right alongside them.”

“The kids are affected by my situation more than they know, probably more than we know,” he continued. “There’s something there that with grace deepens their life, but without grace would probably cripple them.”

But that was July. It was February now, and Brad was gone. What would I find when I pulled up to his house? Joy had always defined the Fallon family; it had withstood sickness and want, but could it withstand death? Could it withstand the loss of the man who purchased it for them with pain and suffering?

Death had come so quickly. A miraculous phone call on Christmas morning. A kidney transplant that afternoon. Recovery. Homecoming. Problems. Back to the hospital. Rejection. Septic shock. Brain death. Death. Too much too quickly for me to grasp, let alone for the children and Victoria, then eight months pregnant with their seventh child.

Again, I made a silent request of Brad. “Please, help them to not lose their joy . . . your joy.”

I drew closer to the house. Someone stood on the porch. It was Veronica, their oldest daughter. She disappeared inside.

Moments later, she reappeared, running towards me with two of her younger brothers.

“Emily, I want to show you . . .” “Emily, Mama said . . .” “Emily, did you know . . .”

Again, the voices sounded all at once. Again, words piled on top of each other and sentences blurred together. Again, I smiled.

They were hurting. They were changed. Their pain was real. But the joy was more real, more lasting. It abided in their eyes, just as it abided in the eyes of their father.

Brad had taught them well. ■

Emily Stimpson writes from Steubenville, Ohio. Previously, she worked as a legislative assistant for Senator Jim Talent (R-MO) and as special assistant to former Attorney General Edwin Meese III at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC.