

The Rev. Brandon Ashcraft
The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (transferred)
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
October 27, 2024
John 10:11-16

Joy and Grief Holding Hands

The bedrock of my daily prayer life is the Daily Office of the Book of Common Prayer. Over the years, its services of Morning and Evening Prayer have become a fixed part of my daily routine; as comforting to me as that first morning cup of coffee. Having prayed these liturgies hundreds of times, their prayers have seeped into the marrow of my bones. The language of their prayers has become part of my lexicon. The theology of their prayers has become the lens through which I make sense of this confusing world.

Consider just one example: the collect appointed for Saturdays in Morning Prayer. This prayer recalls the seventh day of the first Genesis creation story, the day God rested from all his work.¹ It suggests that because God rested, resting is holy, and we should rest too. This concept of sabbath is no doubt familiar to most of you. The less familiar part comes at the end of the prayer. When we ask God to “grant that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to [God’s] people in heaven.”²

The implied theology is that our commitment to rest prepares us for death and the life on the other side of death. I wonder how many of us routinely correlate resting with practicing for death!? This notion that we would prepare for death at all is a radical one, not to mention deeply counter cultural. Death remains a taboo topic in most spaces

¹ Genesis 2:2-3

² A Collect for Saturday from Morning Prayer, Rite II, in The Book of Common Prayer, 99.

in our world. The Church is one of the few places where death remains firmly on the agenda. Every Sunday, our celebration of the Eucharist is a proclamation of our Lord's death. And on this particular Sunday, we remember our departed loved ones.

Today, we observe the Feast of All Souls. Or, as it's also known, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed. Next Sunday's feast of All Saints will honor those heroic witnesses to the gospel, the "hall of fame" of the saints. Today's feast honors ordinary saints. Those saints whose names are not inscribed in prayer books but etched instead on our hearts. And while today is primarily about remembering our departed loved ones, it's also a day to contemplate our own death. To be clear-eyed about our mortality. To ponder the claims that we, as Christians, make about death and the meaning we ascribe to it.

Much like my experience of the Daily Office, today's liturgy informs and shapes that preparation. Our worship this morning is imbued with the profound, poetic Elizabethan verse of the Prayer Book's liturgy for the Burial of the Dead, elevated by our choir's transcendent offering of Duruflé's *Requiem*. The burial liturgy is, to me, the crown jewel of our Prayer Book. A mentor once described its essential character with words I've never forgotten. In the Prayer Book's burial liturgy, she said, "joy and grief hold hands."³ Which is to say that the prayers, the scripture readings, and the hymns create a holy container to hold our grief. In it, we are reminded that even Jesus was acquainted with grief, having shed tears at the grave of his friend Lazarus.

³ The Rev. Dr. Cathy George, then Associate Dean of Formation at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale

And just as the burial liturgy creates sacred space for sadness, it firmly grounds us in hopeful promises. The promise that in death, “life is changed, not ended.”⁴ The Easter promise that Jesus has conquered death forever, opening for us the gates of everlasting life. Its prayers give voice to our sorrow at being separated from the ones we love but see no longer, while proclaiming our joy at their entrance into that place “where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.”⁵ In the burial liturgy, joy and grief – these two unlikely companions – hold hands.

This image of grief alongside joy resonates deeply with me on this particular All Souls Day. Last Sunday, as you all gathered in this space for worship, I was 1,800-something miles away in Granbury, Texas with my family, as my father recently entered hospice care. On a typical visit to Texas, our family agenda is marked by several carefully planned meals, fiercely competitive games of Contract Rummy, and faithful Sunday morning attendance at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. But the routine has now taken on a markedly different shape. There’s far less feasting, as my father’s appetite has dwindled. There’s little time for card games, as the work of getting his affairs in order consumes most of our time. And Holy Communion is now brought from the altar of Good Shepherd to my parents’ living room by a Eucharistic Visitor. These recent visits, along with our daily FaceTime calls and texts, are tinged by an unmistakable grief. They are also deeply grace-filled, because journeying with someone you love in the liminal space between life and death is profoundly holy.⁶

⁴ From the Proper Preface for the Commemoration of the Dead, from the Book of Common Prayer, 382.

⁵ From the Commendation of the Burial of the Dead, Rite II, in the Book of Common Prayer, 499/

⁶ In a moment of holy synchronicity, my father, T.M. Ashcraft, entered into the nearer presence of our Lord a couple of hours after this sermon was preached, having just worshipped online with his parish community of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd of Granbury, Texas.

It is a path I know that many of you have walked and are walking – and it is a path we will all walk, someday. Thankfully, our life in Christian community – our life as a people held in common in Christ – prepares us for this journey. In the waters of baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death. Each week, in the Eucharist, we receive a foretaste of the banquet that awaits us on the other side of death. And in the burial liturgy, we learn to entrust our loved ones to God’s eternal safekeeping, with these holy words: “Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend [our beloved]. Receive them into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.”⁷ No matter how much we love someone, we cannot protect or shield them from death, so we entrust them to the Good Shepherd. The one who knows us each by name. The one who prepares the way for us. The one who has conquered death *for us*, so that death becomes for us the way that leads to eternal life.

On this All Souls Day, even as our hearts are heavy with grief, we remember with joy the faithful departed. We read their names aloud, entrusting them one by one to God’s eternal love and care. Then, as we join our song with theirs, and “with all the company of heaven,” we make our pilgrimage to this holy table, to receive tokens of grace in the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist. To hold in our very hands the grief and joy of a life laid down for us: “a pledge of our inheritance in that kingdom where there is no death, neither sorrow nor crying, but the fullness of joy with all the saints.”⁸ Amen.

⁷ The Prayer of Commendation, from the Burial of the Dead, Rite II, in The Book of Common Prayer, 499.

⁸ The Postcommunion Prayer from the Burial of the Dead, Rite II, in The Book of Common Prayer, 498.