



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Good Material To Work With

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
November 1, 2009 - All Saints Sunday

Grief is so powerful that when it comes our way we in our common parlance speak of being “Grief Stricken.” Grief strikes and it strikes hard. Grief registers itself not only on the level of our weeping physical tears of sadness, grief also strikes us in our soul where we have a different kind of profound and silent weeping. Grief registers not only in our psyche, but in our minds and our bodies as well. I am frequently amazed at how without any intentionality on my part, I will for no apparent reason at all be thinking of someone dear to me and then in a moment of awareness, I become conscious that that particular day is the anniversary of that loved one’s death or it is their birthday, or it is the anniversary of a wonderful time we had together. Grief is the companion of all human beings. To be human is to have grief. Jesus said, “Blessed are they who mourn for they will be comforted.”

“Comforted,” in this sentence from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, does not mean consoled. It means something much deeper and mysterious. It means, “being made stronger with.” In the mind of Jesus, the journey of grief is a journey of transformation – a transformational journey to strength or in the words of the book of Revelation, “Look I am making everything new.” Grief is so powerful, so able to strike us in surprising ways, so ready to remind us of our mortality and the impermanence of our bodily, mortal existence, that something that powerful as grief has the sacred capacity not only to strike us but also to make us stronger, more tenacious, to make us new, to make us more enduring. In the Eucharistic prayer today we will pray about “running with endurance the race that is set before us.”

What is the key to grief becoming our comfort? To grief making us stronger? It is the word, “with.” I love the word comfort. It means “forte” – strong and its prefix “com” – with – “to be made stronger with another.” Grief is good material to work WITH. So we have to ask what is behind the word With? With whom?

Well, the answer is “With God,” and also with those who have gone before, and with also one another. And all three companions – God, those who have died, and one another – all of these truths are realized in this annual ritual called All Saints Day, celebrated throughout Christianity today but celebrated with special energy at All Saints Church, for this special day in the liturgical calendar is the day after which this parish is named. All Saints Day is the patronal festival of All Saints Church.

In the All Saints Day liturgy, we observe and sing about the eternal relationship between those who have passed through death and have entered into eternity with God. We use a variety of poetic images to observe a reality that is actually beyond description. We speak of those who

have died being one with God, being now in the Greater Life, being in eternal rest. All of these are metaphors, but at the center of that is this word “rest” -- Requiem, the Latin word for rest. That is the name of the choral music form given to the classic musical genre written to express this reality. So that is the first With, with God. For those who have died, life is changed, not ended. They are with God.

Our Choirmaster, James Walker has chosen Gabriel Faure’s Requiem for this year’s All Saints Eucharist. That is such a pleasing choice to me not only because it is incandescently brilliant music, but because Faure wanted his Requiem to be unique among all Requia.

I love uniqueness and particularly courageous uniqueness. Faure wrote the following about this piece, “Everything I managed to entertain by way of religious imagination I put into my own Requiem, which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.” The first and last words in the piece are Requiem, rest.

Faure wrote further, "It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has even called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience.” Commenting on another composer Faure said “The music of **Charles-François Gounod** has been criticized for its overinclination towards human tenderness. But Gounod’s nature predisposed him to feel this way: religious emotion took this form inside him. Is it not necessary to accept the artist's nature? As to my Requiem, perhaps I have also instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ!”

Faure was the chief organist at the Église de la Madeleine in Paris for many years and like our organists here was very opinionated [laughter] and rightly so about what makes for healthy liturgical theology. Faure said, “After all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different.”

So Faure courageously and daringly altered the text of the Offertory which the choir will sing in a few moments. He changed the words “deliver the souls of all the faithful departed” which was the traditional line in the offertory in a Requiem to simply state “deliver the souls of the departed.” Not just the faithful. Which it can be argued is a fundamental theological change.

His changes are in line with our faith here – that this Eucharist is not only for the faithful departed, but for all, “Whose faith is known to God alone.” We pray this morning not only for those in this book of remembrance but for those who were killed by drone missiles from U.S. military in this damnable war. We pray for those 45,000 people who died in this country alone just since last All Saints Sunday because they had no health care insurance. We pray for them and we pray that we may have the strength to change a world so there are no more drones, no more wars, no more people dying of inadequate health care.

This liturgy also claims that those who have died in God are “knit together into one communion and fellowship.” Those who have died, using St. Paul’s imagery, have had the refuse of their lives burned away in a refining fire and now they in their state of wholeness and light are with one another-- that is our second With. Those who have died live in community – all the saints do.

And here comes one of the healthiest traditions of our branch of Christianity. Not only are those who have died with God. And not only are they with one another in a communion of all the saints. Those who have died are with us. They, with God and with one another, encompass us all in a great cloud of witnesses so that we, rejoicing in their fellowship, may run with endurance the race that is set before us.

There is a very healthy rhythm in our tradition. The rhythm goes like this. After our particular loved one's death we may come to the funeral or memorial service or gravesite to grieve that person's no longer being with us physically. On that occasion we celebrate that person's gifts to us and to the world. And our grief and our thanksgiving are focused solely and appropriately on that person.

When I meet with a family prior to the funeral to prepare my funeral or memorial service homily, I ask the family members to tell me what they are thankful for. That is always such a magnificent and moving and transformative experience for me because it is filled with profound, rich, and moving gratitude. Then I often say to the family that a person's strong characteristics for which they are grateful never take form in a vacuum. Often there are powerful challenges in our lives that create a crucible in which we develop our strong personality traits or our gifts of character – often we become strong despite the conditions of life - being orphaned at an early age, a horrible earlier divorce, struggles with a disease like cancer or addiction, a life of freeing oneself from abuse in a family or abuse in a religion. After we talk about both the thanksgivings and the challenges in the deceased's life we see how they weave an integral tapestry of that person's life. That is such an important step in transforming the powers of grief into the power for the living of our days.

Then the church's rhythm continues. This feast day that comes once a year in which we acknowledge that other essential part of the transformation of grief – a crucial part of our grief being transformed into a resource for living is to focus on the fact that those we love and see no longer are now in a communion of saints and they are not cut off from us by death. But they work together in a conspiracy of cheer and courage to help you and me overcome the challenges of our lives so that we in turn may be a gift to our family, our friends, our vocational colleagues, the church, nation, and the world. I love to imagine all those who helped form me to be the person I am, getting together this morning in the Greater Life, knowing one another in ways not available in this life. They couldn't have even met in this life – my grandparents, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Rabbi Friedman, my dad, parishioners of mine in the parishes I've served, all my personal panoply of saints joining with all your pantheon of saints and loved ones forming this great conspiracy of love for all of us and for this Church.

Speaking of this Church, one of those saints into whose membership of the communion of All Saints we celebrate this morning is the one to whom we dedicate this All Saints Sunday Eucharist today, John Harris Burt, rector of our parish from 1957-67. George Regas, our rector emeritus, and I returned yesterday from John Burt's funeral on Friday in Marquette, Michigan on the banks of Lake Superior. John died last week at age 91.

There were his widow Martha and their four daughters who grew up in the house in which George Regas lived with his family for twenty-eight years and where Hope and I live now for the past fourteen years. His daughter Susie embraced me and said, "You are part of our

family, you are our brother.” She lived from age five to fifteen in that house and in this church. She remembers the day after her father organized a rally with his friend Martin Luther King, Jr. He was one of the few white people who stood on the stage with Martin King and after it was publicized in the Los Angeles Times, Susie picked up the phone in the rectory one day and a man told her to get out of the house because it was about to be bombed.

So many connections to this parish—Clarke Oler when he was a young thing served as assistant to John Burt when John was the rector of the church in Youngstown, Ohio. John left here after ten years of brilliant, irritating ministry [laughter] to become the Bishop of Ohio.

His oldest grandchild Friday read these words which were a commentary John wrote upon the occasion of the 50th reunion of the Amhurst College class of 1940. John wrote and said, “Now at 72, I won’t deny that physically I’ve slowed down a bit. But I do find myself, from time to time, breaking into a joyous though perhaps pale Fred Astaire imitation. It was Fred himself who in Top Hat says, ‘Every once in awhile I find myself dancing.’ Well, so do I—dancing in the battles against racism, in the struggles to create a better opportunity for the poor, in the minuets of interchange that can create understanding amid the clashing pluralisms of today’s society and between the contending nationalisms in the world.”

He concluded, “Courage and commitment are not fashionable these days. But courage is not yet a museum piece. Courage is what gives the human spirit an indomitable quality. Courage is what distinguishes us human beings from everything else. We are not just animals; we are not machines; we were not created to serve economic systems or businesses or governments. We are human beings, capable of love and laughter and commitment. And the challenge before us is to muster the courage to stop any accelerating process which depreciates the significance of our humanity or depreciates the personhood of others. But those challenges shall not deter us in doing now what we can.”

On Friday, one of the five bishops who were there was the Rt. Rev. Arthur Williams, who preached the homily—he had good material to work with in John Burt. He said John was always standing against racism, hunger, poverty, and war. And always standing for the ordination of women and participatory democracy in the church. He was always on the side of human beings everywhere and against anything that dehumanized anyone. And then he quoted from John’s 1977 address to the Ohio Diocesan Convention challenging them to get ready for the 80’s.

John Burt said:

“If ever there is a church that is
more concerned with the church’s fabric than its mission,
more concerned with making mistakes than making the effort,
if people see a church that is more fearful about risking its money than risking its soul or
its life,
that church will be noncontroversial, non-irritating, a doughy residue incapable of
communicating the mighty Gospel of the Lord and an anesthetic to the best impulses of
the human heart.”

When the Episcopal Church was turning inward with fights about liturgy and other things, John helped co-found the Episcopal Urban Caucus to focus on the plight of the poor.

Now John Burt and all the other friends and loved ones and family members whose names are printed in the liturgy and in the Memorial Book which we will place on the Table in a moment are in a company encouraging you and me onward.

Mary Oliver closes her poem *The Summer Day* by asking two questions:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

(From *New and Selected Poems*, 1992 Beacon Press, Boston, MA)

Each of us is called to grapple this All Saints Day with what it is each of us plans to do with our one wild and precious life. Take heart, my friends, we don't have to do it alone. The saints are here, they surround us in a conspiracy of cheer and courage, working with all their unblemished sacred energy to make you and me to become our true selves, to help you and me live lives of love unblemished and unsullied by fear, to help you and me be people of courage and daring and imagination and energy and joy, to bring an end to war, to bring an end to poverty, to bring an end to homelessness and injustice, and to stop the killing of people but always to kill the discrimination and violence and indifference that does kill people.

Amen.