
Homily for All Saints' Choral Requiem Eucharist

by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Sunday after All Saints' Day

Three years ago, a popular Christian author and blogger named Rachel Held Evans died at thirty-seven years of age, leaving behind a husband, two young children, and a younger sister named Amanda Held Opelt who adored her. In the wake of Rachel's death, and of her own third miscarriage, Amanda wrote a book about finding hope in rituals of grief.^[i] It begins with her stumbling into her first ever Ash Wednesday service, which she is attending because this day had been important to her sister. Amanda arrives unfashionably late, gets lost in the building, and fumbles awkwardly through the service—with her water-resistant coat announcing her every move with a loud and embarrassing swooshing sound.

When it is time to receive ashes, she takes her cues from the more experienced Episcopalians around her, hoping that will help her not look like the novice she is. "But this *is* new to me," she admits. "This was all new to me. I don't know how to carry death. The burden is still strange to me, and I am clumsy in the bearing of it."^[ii]

None of us really knows how to carry death, do we? We don't know how to carry the particular deaths or losses we grieve today. *It is all new*. They are all new, to us. Neither do we know how to carry the fact of death itself—of the fragility of this one, precious life. *The burden is strange, and we are clumsy in the bearing of it*.

And that is ok. Hard, yes, but ok, because we do not bear it alone. That is why we're here today, isn't it? Because we know that we need God, and each other. Because we need the communion of saints: the saints gathered here; the saints we remember today; and all the saints who have come before us, whose images and names and music and prayers fill this place and have made it holy. When we don't know how to pray, or what to say or believe, we need the holy company and prayers and stories and faith of others. When we don't know what to do, or how to go forward, we need holy rituals: paths carved out through this unfamiliar, strange, frightening terrain by those who have traveled here before.

In rituals, in music, in Christian community, we don't have to understand. We don't have to come up with the right words or actions. We don't have to worry about how clumsily we carry death, loss, or our own mortality. Because we are carried, also. Because they carry us. We are here today to re-member, to embody, that: we do not grieve alone, or without hope. We do not cry alone, or pray alone, or hope alone.

And we are here today because we have loved. We have loved what death can touch. That is how Jewish philosopher and physician Yehuda Halevi put it a thousand years ago, in this prayerful poem:

'Tis a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.

A fearful thing
to love, to hope, to dream, to be –
to be,
And oh, to lose.

A thing for fools, this,
And a holy thing,
a holy thing
to love.

For your life has lived in me,
your laugh once lifted me,
your word was gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,
a holy thing, to love
what death has touched.

We are here today to witness, also: to witness to this fearful, holy, human love—and to the love of Jesus Christ, who became what death can touch, and showed us how to love what death can touch. We are here to witness to Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, putting all things, even death itself, under his feet.

So we clumsily bear this new and strange burden, together, in hope. We show up for one another. We pray and sing. We remember. We witness. And we persist in love. We persist in loving what death can touch, because we persist in hope—in *confidence*, “in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting.”^[iii]

And in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God^[iv] our loved ones; ourselves; and our fearful, holy, human love.

[i] Amanda Held Opelt, *A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in Rituals of Grief and Healing* (Worthy Books, 2022).

[ii] Opelt, 6.

[iii] From the prayers for Burial of the Dead, Rite I, BCP p. 481.

[iv] From the prayer of committal, BCP p. 485 and 501.