

Homily
55th Reunion Memorial Service
May 30, 2024

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We're the survivors. Seventy-seven of us have died since our last reunion. One was Susan, my freshman roommate. One was a boy (still a boy in my memory), Tom from Iowa, who took me to a palm reading, and then to wander Harvard Square one evening in our freshman year. I'm sure, for all of us, those who have died include people we knew well, people whose lives we touched only briefly, and many we did not know at all. Our call today is to remember them all, to honor them, and to welcome them. My own faith tradition speaks of a cloud of witnesses — the permeability of the veil between here and eternity – which gives me hope that our beloved dead are here among us even now as we gather to remember them.

It's not easy. In a culture that tends to deny the reality of death, we have made the choice to set aside this afternoon of our reunion to remember and name our classmates who have died, to, as one poet writes, “stare grief in its mangled face” and not to turn away. As I get older, as more friends and family and classmates die, I find myself agreeing with Edna St. Vincent Millay's “Dirge:”

*Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave...
quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.*

I'm with her. I don't approve. I want them back, even knowing that more of us will join their ranks, our names read at future reunions, the dead eventually outnumbering the living, till the last of us is gone. But there's a line in the Episcopal burial service that reads:

*Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
All of us go down to the dust;
yet even at the grave we make our song:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

It's the defiance in those “alleluias” that brings me to the edge of tears nearly every time, a sense of “ok, death has won this round, but it's not the end.” Whether one's faith tradition envisions eternal life, reincarnation, or simply the return of our physical elements to the natural world, those alleluias deny death the final word. Even as I might sense the cloud of witnesses surrounding us, I also love Ross Gay's poem about burying his father's ashes with two bare root

plum trees, where “the roots curled around him like a shawl,” where he would hear his father whisper “good morning” in the leaves, and later sense that it was his father “kicking buckets of juice” down his chin from the first bite of a plum. My current understanding of the universe posits that everything that exists came from a single entity, which means everything is connected, and nothing, not an atom, is lost. That “dust” in “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” is stardust.

Yes, but.... The dead are still gone from our presence, and so of course we grieve that loss. And it’s not just the individual friends and classmates that we grieve, but the failure of our youthful visions to come to full fruition; we grieve the dreams we had of a more just and peaceable world. The daily news – including this year’s chaotic Harvard graduation (or not) – is a stark reminder. And yet, and yet, so many of our classmates *did* make a difference for the good, and we are better because of them. Maya Angelou writes:

*When great souls die....
Our senses ...
whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.*

“We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.” I know I’m a better person because of Paula, who led a group of us on Zoom during the Covid years like a warrior angel, even at the end as she lay dying, and whose light still shines on those of us remaining. I’m sure all of us can name classmates whose voices may have been hushed, but who enriched our lives, who changed the world.

I want to offer a final poem before the reading of the names and the tolling of the bell. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, a bell is an auditory icon – an icon of the voice of God. After we speak those beloved names in this holy place, a bell – God’s voice – will speak them into eternity, where we, in time, will join them. As we hear their names, may we recall specific moments in their lives, and be grateful.

*Never with us to be who they were, writes poet Jeanne Lohmann,
still they are more than the dead.
Each was one and is one, singular,
keeps a particular history, a voice.*

When you call me, call me Ben.

Lillian is my name.

I am the one, that one:

the boy who made dams in the gutters,

then let loose the water in the streets:

the woman who loved egrets

and the spare beauty of bones;

I am your friend, [your classmate].

Resurrect me in specifics.

Give me a body of remembered detail.

Say Hank. Say my name.

We will.

Amen.