

All Souls Day November 2, 2009

Church of St. Ann

Corinthians 15:51-57

Matthew 28:1-10

Since becoming a member of St. Ann's I have always been drawn to the phrase which is used as sort of a motto here for the month of November, the month when we remember those who have died..... all souls. It is on the banner which hangs up over the altar to the left and it reads: "Changed, not ended". It comes from the *Rite of Christian Burial* and was referred to in our first reading tonight, "We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed in an instant." My meditation on this phrase provided immense comfort for me when on Christmas Eve, 2004, my good and beautiful mother suffered a fatal stroke in her ninetieth year. What a glorious day to enter heaven!

Ours has always been a healthy family and she was the first to leave us. I was with her as she slipped into heaven and I watched her face transform from the prison of a stroke into its vision of the beatific and then into the stone coldness of death. It was a beautiful experience and I knew at that moment that she was in heaven. I knew at that moment that she was not "ended," but that she was changed into a member of that "cloud of witnesses" who watch over us in the presence of God, according to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. Our family celebrated her passing into heaven with joyfulness.

Little did I know that I was on a learning curve with this experience because six weeks later, my healthy, vigorous, beloved husband, a father and a grandfather, dropped dead on a tennis court. As I pulled the curtain back in the emergency room to be at his side, I felt my mom holding me up as I viewed his serene face. The very first thought that came into my brain at this calamitous moment was, "he is in heaven!" My second thought was, "I will see him again."

He too was "changed" into a member of that "cloud of witnesses" who watches over us in the presence of God. The magnitude of these thoughts, for the moment, smothered all

tragedy that I felt and I drifted into the blessed shock which allowed me to cope. Our family again celebrated this passing into heaven. I think perhaps because of what we had experienced six weeks earlier.

In January of this year, my family celebrated the passing into heaven of our patriarch, my dad, at the age of ninety eight. He simply decided it was time to go to his true home. I was with him and could only kiss his face and send him off with the words, “Oh lucky man!” Again, our family celebrated with joyfulness. We knew that there were many arms waiting to receive him into his new life.

Our faith is full of teachings about how wonderful heaven will be. We hear stories of some who have had near death experiences and the glory that they glimpsed... but still we do not really know what heaven will be like. We hope mightily that we will be with our loved ones again. I have come to cling to that comforting phrase, “Changed not ended.” It leaves the way open for oceans of comfort for me.

In thinking about this, I’ve come to the conclusion that those who die are not the only ones who have changed. We too have changed. We see life much differently now. For many of us, our loss causes us to change against our will. We have become orphans, widowers or widows..... survivors. With a hole in our hearts and our spirits deflated, these changes fill us with grief, emptiness, anxiety, loneliness, anger, depression, and all the ills associated with those conditions.

But there is a challenge here, in this state of mourning, this “change” in which we find ourselves. It requires hard work. It takes a long time. The challenge is to either wallow in all the sorrows we feel - building up layers of unhappiness and gloom, clinging to others in unhealthy ways OR seek to be with the spirits of the loved ones we have lost.....How can we be with those we lost if they are busy operating in that glorious “cloud of witnesses” where there is only joy and happiness?

It helps to watch for occasional signs of intervention in our lives from those we have lost. These are very comforting. I think another simple way to stay close to them is to meditate on the words of the angel at the tomb when Mary of Magdala and the women came to anoint the body of Jesus on Easter morning. What the angel essentially said was: *Why do you seek the living among the dead?.....Why do you seek the living among the dead?* The angel was saying to Mary, and to us, that at death, life comes in a new way. Those we love are no longer living in the old way but in a new way. They are “changed, not ended”. It is the Easter or Pascal mystery lived out in our own lives: birth, death, and rebirth.

Yes, they are busy out there in that glorious “cloud of witnesses” but for me, this means that they live on through the virtues they practiced on this earth, the goodness they left behind. We have the opportunity to unite with them by also living those virtues, loving the good things they loved; perhaps doing things they liked to do. This is the change we can embrace.

Now I understand why I always think of my dad when I am out on a golf course. He loved the game. It was an expression of his sportsmanship, his fairness and elegant courtesy. I think of my mom when I stand at the sink peeling potatoes. She loved feeding her family and nurturing them. I remember her when I celebrate mass with a faith community because of her strong faith.

I think of my husband when I pay the bills each month because he was so careful in how he managed our life and made sure that our needs were met. I think of him as I set the garbage at the curb every week. For 41 years he silently performed that thankless job for our family. I think of him when I board an airplane because he loved to travel and organize adventures for us. When his alma mater, the University of Notre Dame, plays football in the fall, I think of him, even though I don't really like football. There are many more things that have become part of my daily living so that I am united with those who have gone before me. I am changing.

When I was asked to consider speaking to you this evening I asked my family what they thought I should say. One of them replied, “tell them that when we die and go to heaven, it will be so glorious that no matter what.... we would never want to return.” That is a change which I am happy to anticipate...” *“And when this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is **your** victory? Where, O death, is **your** sting?’”*

Mary Louise Hartman