
Christmas in Gatlinburg

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
The Sunday after All Saints' Day
Choral Requiem Eucharist

Earlier today I baptized my sister's daughter, Elizabeth Cully Sutton. Elizabeth's middle name, Cully, was also my maternal grandmother's middle name, Mildred Cully Wilson; however we just called her "Mimi." Knowing that I was going to baptize Elizabeth Cully this morning and preach at this service later in the afternoon resulted in me thinking about my grandmother all week long.

Mimi died on October 1st, a little over 20 years ago. She was widowed at a young age (during my mother's freshman year of college) and lived just up the street from us in McMinnville, TN. Mimi was a part of our daily lives and her sudden death was paralyzing to our family and left us in a state of grief, especially my mother, an only child.

We knew Mimi's death was tough on my mother, so my sister, father and I, were willing to do anything to help mom through the grief. Mom was clear about what she needed—"help her get through Thanksgiving and Christmas. Thankfully, our dear family friends (who were godparents this morning at the baptism) invited us over to their home for Thanksgiving. However, Christmas presented another problem—"there was nowhere for us to go!

Mom and Dad decided we were going to do something totally different, and when you combined my father's sense of adventure with his frugality, it has the potential to be a recipe for disaster; and it was no surprise that we ended up having Christmas in Gatlinburg!

Dad rented a Gatlinburg chalet that most fraternities would have passed over. And as fate would have it, our arrival coincided with the arrival of a winter storm! So, there we were, snowed in, in a less than desirable chalet, in order to avoid the grief of being in our home, around our Christmas tree, without our beloved Mimi.

After 24 hours in our chalet the tears started flowing, they weren't just Mom's tears, they were all our tears. We wanted to be at home and we all missed our Mimi. As we sat around the family room at a less than desirable chalet in Gatlinburg, the four of us came to understand two important things: 1. You can't run from grief, and 2. Mimi would not have wanted us to spend Christmas this way!

Those two important points are why many of you are here this evening. Instead of running from your grief, you are here naming your grief. You have come to hear the name of someone you loved that is no longer in your life. Hearing that name read, acknowledging that grief, is both important and holy.

It is important to name the grief, to shed the tear and to offer that pain to God in the holiness of this space and in the beauty of this requiem Eucharist.

Hearing that name read is also holy. It is also a reminder that they now dwell on another shore and in a greater light, as they feast at a heavenly banquet with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. They are with all the saints who have gone before.

The second thing my family learned in that chalet is that Mimi would not have wanted us to spend Christmas in Gatlinburg. She would have stood in that room and gave us a lecture on how we do things as a family.

Today, amidst this holy space, in the midst of this beautiful liturgy and music, as you hold the one you loved in prayer, you are in what the Celts call a "thin place."

It is in this place you will be reminded of how the person you loved lived, worked and approached life. Though they no longer dwell with us in the flesh, their example, spirits and yes, even voices remind us of who we are and whose we are.

But there is one final point; all human relationships are complex. No doubt, as you remember the person love this evening, you are regretting things done and left undone, words spoken and those that need to be spoken. Amidst this liturgy and music, offer those things to God in prayer.

May you to leave here with the assurance your loved one is in a place of peace. Their struggles and pain are no more, God has wiped away every tear from their eye, and perhaps the peace and forgiveness they now experience is something being offered to you this evening!

Offer those prayers, receive that peace, and believe that their soul and all the souls of the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN.