
Voices of Hope

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
All Saints' Sunday – Year C

I had a glimpse of the kingdom of God here at the Cathedral on All Saints' Day. It was our 28th annual Homeless Requiem and Dinner, when hundreds of saints gather in this place, to remember those who've died on the streets in the last year.

Now, the word “saint” can mean a lot of things. It refers to historical heroes of the church, to souls we've lost in our own lives, and to all those Christians who make up the body of Christ. Yet, in spite of the broad scope of the term, we often reserve it for a special few, who've lived pure, holy lives—or done something dramatically extraordinary for Christ, like sacrifice their lives or give up all their possessions. In this way, “sainthood” gets reduced to a moral accomplishment, rather than an identity and call that all Christians share, by the grace of God.

What I saw here on All Saints' Day was a vision of this depth and breadth and beauty of the communion of saints: a communion that, Jesus reminds us, includes the poor, hungry, excluded, and grief-stricken—and all those ordinary Christians, who love God and bless others in their own extraordinary ways.

And so that all of you may get a glimpse of that vision, too, I'd like to share three snapshots of the evening—three images of the saints at work.

The first is of Child Hall, decorated for a fall feast. Volunteers are serving food and drinks with grace, excellence, and hospitality. At the tables, homeless guests and Cathedral members seem to be deep in conversation. Dean Candler is playing the piano, which adds a touch of joyful elegance to the room. When he blesses the food (which he does a few times), he reminds us that it's not the only thing that will be blessed this evening: that we all have blessings to give and receive.

The second picture is of the Atrium, where people are milling around, checking out the homeless-service providers that have come. In the middle of this flurry of activity, Church of the Common Ground (a worshipping community for the homeless) has set up an oasis of peace and relaxation: a foot clinic, where volunteers are talking and laughing as they tenderly wash the feet of tired guests—and as they, too, bless one another.

The final picture is here in the nave during the Requiem Eucharist, where all these saints have gathered to remember and pray, bring with them into this sacred space all kinds of brokenness and loss: lost homes and jobs and lives. Broken relationships. Broken hearts. It's a solemn, sad image, in many ways, which confronts us with hard truths—like the number of people in this city who lack adequate shelter, and the grief and fear surrounding the closing of the city's largest overflow shelter. We hear the names of fifty-eight homeless people who have died this year, and witness this community of saints carry to the altar crosses with those names. As we're uplifted by our guest choir, the Voices of Hope, we remember that they're prisoners, who will be cuffed and shackled and returned to prison after the service.

It's difficult to take all of this in—not only remembering those who have died homeless, but also bearing witness to the ways that the living are suffering.

On my own, I doubt I could bear it.

But the liturgy—our common prayer—reminds me that I don't have to. That we don't bear any of this alone. It gives us space to lament, while being held by God and one another. It helps us name what's broken, while pointing us to reconciliation and resurrection. It promises us that we're not alone, and that death and loss are not the whole story. And so, our common prayer is an expression of hope.

It's no accident, I believe, that the prison choir is called "Voices of Hope." There were many voices of hope ringing out that night, protesting despair: homeless persons who refuse to give up hope and dignity; homeless ministries who refuse to be defeated by disagreements and politics; prisoners who refuse to be defined forever by the wrongs they've done; and Cathedral members who refuse to close their eyes or hearts to the suffering of others.

Our common prayer is a chorus of hope.

Sure, we all still have a lot to learn about one another and how to care for one another, and we all have a lot to learn about ourselves, too. But what I saw here was a promise—a seal, like the one these children will receive today, marking us, all, as Christ's own, forever.

Because of this, in spite of all that claims to divide us, we are already one in Christ, even as Christ is still at work reconciling us to one another. We are already Christ's body in the world, even as we're still becoming that body. We are already the saints of God, and we are called to become the saints of God—called to point to the Kingdom of God, here; called to bless; called to hope; called to practice that hope and live in that hope in the meantime.

And so, like Paul, I give thanks for the saints—for *this* community of saints and for the exchange of blessing I witnessed this week: for our homeless and incarcerated and other guests; for the faithful saints who prepared for this all year; and for all those who supported this event in any way.

And I give thanks to you, all of you, for your hope in Christ--the hope that draws you here and then sends you out, to be a blessing for others.