The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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You Are Not Alone

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
at the Requiem Choral Eucharist for All Faithful Departed
All Saints' Day

One of the saints who entered into the nearer presence of God this year was a doctor named Rachel Naomi Remen. Diagnosed with Crohn's Disease as a child, Remen decided to become a physician so that she could practice a different kind of medicine—one that was more personal, more compassionate, less detached than that which she had experienced during all the blood draws and surgeries of her youth.

Some of Remen's colleagues considered her approach to her work foolish and "soft", especially in the early years before most medical schools started prioritizing the teaching of a good bedside manner. Remen described once getting called out by a fellow resident for singing to, and holding the hand of, a crying child in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit.

Why did you do that? the other physician asked. *Why did you bother doing that? It's a waste of time and it's unprofessional and it doesn't help their pain.* To which Dr. Remen responded, "It may not help the pain, but it does help the loneliness." [1]

It may not help the pain, but it does help the loneliness. This evening, we gather to remember those dear to us who, for a while, we see no more. Some of us have come here with deep gaping wounds, our grief so fresh and raw it's as if we were lying on some cosmic operating table, our insides exposed to the whole universe. Others of us have had some time—perhaps many years—of living with loss, and while we may go for quite a while without feeling its sting, there are moments when it can still surprise us, knocking us with a blow so sharp it takes our breath away.

Whatever the nature of our pain, when we leave this holy place in a while, that pain will not have magically disappeared. That is not how grief works. When we leave this place, our pain will not magically have disappeared; hopefully, though, by God's grace, each of us will go forth from this service a little less lonely. This is, after all, one of the great gifts of All Saints' Day—its annual reminder that in spite of everything that conspires to keep us human beings divided and compartmentalized into tribes and races and nations and tax brackets and social status and voting blocks, we are all—each one of us—made to be in community. We are created to be *with* each other and *for* each other. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, we are called "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." All Saints' Day gives us the opportunity to do just that. To join together in remembrance, yes, but also in relationship.

Which comes as great Good News, because grief can be such an incredibly isolating thing. Many people withdraw from the bereaved either out of an unconscious effort to protect themselves or because there seems no "right" thing to say and they are terrified of getting it wrong. Others of us—those of us more inclined to running our mouths under any and all circumstances—others of us may blurt out something well intended that actually does end up hurting someone.

"I know just how you feel," an earnest friend tells us in those first horrific weeks and months after our loss. *No you don't!* we silently scream inside our head. What do you know of how the morning sun turned his hair the color of whisky or of the dreams we had for her future? What do you know of the hours we spent picking out names for first one baby and then a second and then a third until finally, after counting up all the miscarriages, we just stopped. What do you know of how, after years of tension and discord in our relationship, it seemed like we might finally be able to sort things out. Only suddenly there was no more time. What could you possibly

know of this?

Grief can be an intensely isolating experience. How wonderful, then, that the Church sets aside several days each year for all of us who have had our hearts broken to come together and be real about our pain. Not under the illusion that the pain will somehow go away, but in the hope that we may find comfort in sharing that pain with others. In the relief of not having to pretend we're doing all right when actually we're falling apart; in having a time set aside for speaking precious names aloud once more; in claiming the great assurances of our faith; in having a perfect stranger make clear in the simple touch of a hand that somehow they do sense what we're going through.

And so, my friends, as we gather this evening in this sacred space with the solace of great music and ancient prayers, may you know that you are not alone. No matter how isolated you may feel. You are not alone. As today's epistle reading notes, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are." *That is what we are.* We are not orphans. We are not without a family. On the contrary, we are surrounded by sisters and brothers who know what it is to love and to lose and then to find all over again. All we have to do to see these sisters and brothers is to look around us in the pews.

But not only that. Not only that, because in some mysterious way, far beyond our capacity to hope or to imagine, in some mysterious way, our beloved dead who pray this day "on another shore and in a greater light"—they are with us, too. They are with us, too. "O blest communion, fellowship divine; we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine." [2]

Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Welcome to All Saints' Day. I wish you every blessing and comfort of this feast as we continue our pilgrimage on earth until at last we walk each other home. Amen.

[1] Remen, Rachel Naomi. Kitchen Table Wisdom. Riverhead Books, 2006.

[2] "For all the saints," stanza 4. Text by Walsham How

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