
Thanksgiving and Celebration for the Life of Louise A. Kan

**A homily by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
At the funeral for Louise A. Kan**

There are two ways that I connected with our beloved Louise. The first was through her love of music as a professional pianist. As her niece, Laura, remarked in her Remembrances a few minutes ago, Louise frequently sought out places in Atlanta where she could practice and rehearse playing piano; rehearse for performances at the Fernbank museum for example. Finding a place to practice was also one of the ways that she and I connected, as she asked me about the possibility of practicing here in one of our Cathedral basement rooms. Now I also brought with me today this hymnbook of our church, titled, *Wonder, Love and Praise*. Just the title alone represents for me Louise's love of music, and her attitude of joy in being able to play piano. I'll say more about her spirit of wonder and joy in a few minutes.

But a second way that I got to know Louise was through her love of books. As a highly literate New Yorker she was cosmopolitan in her taste, and that became evident to me when she gave me one of her books to read. It's William Taubman's Pulitzer Prize winning biography of *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (Norton, 2017). It's all of 800 pages. Now really, Louise! I did read about 600 of them, because she was so enthusiastic about it. And though I really enjoyed it, I tried not to be too excited because I was afraid she would give me other books just as long to read. □

But finally I got to know her at a deeper level beginning five years ago this month. In March of 2018, a year before the pandemic became global, I began offering a Sunday morning drop-in class between services called, "Our True Selves." Immediately Louise became one of our most faithful attendees. The framework of the class was a 50-minute hour where participants were asked to share three things, sometimes beginning with one other listener but then sharing insights or next steps with the entire group: 1) something going well in their life, 2) something that was difficult, challenging, or calling for support or assistance, and 3) something they looked forward to in the coming week or period of time.

The class was subtitled "co-listening," with the ground rules calling for participants to take turns listening to each other empathetically, and without interruption, without analyzing, and without giving advice. Also required was a strict code of confidentiality, not even referring to what someone said a few minutes after their turn without first asking for explicit permission. Louise, for her part, took advantage of that emotional safe space, and frequently shared the kind of challenges that many of us here today recall in her life. And outside of class too, she confided in me and other clergy colleagues and Cathedral friends with transparency about her inner life; with an openness and honesty that was both endearing and a challenging for us.

It became most challenging for us when Louise's experience of reality diverged from our norms of expectation and interpretation. But despite that challenge, what most impressed me was the confident way in which she held onto her identity as someone firmly in touch with reality, even when I asked her to entertain reasonable alternatives to her point of view. What ego strength she showed us!

Louise's strength of character also resonates with that first reading chosen for us to contemplate for this memorial occasion here today. The reading begins with the undaunted declaration that, however otherwise we may think about this occasion of death, "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God . . .

² In the eyes of the foolish . . . their departure was thought to be a disaster,

³ and their going from us to be their destruction;

but they are at peace.

⁴ For though in the sight of others they were punished,
their hope is full of immortality.

⁵ Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,
because God tested them and found them worthy of [God]self . . .”

And then the reading concludes with this declaration, challenging us to consider this alternative way of viewing death and the meaning of someone’s life after death.

⁹ Those who trust in [God] will understand truth,
and the faithful will abide with him in love,
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,
and he watches over his elect. (Wisdom 3:1-5, 9)

So here we are invited to affirm, on behalf of our sister-in-faith, that she is indeed one of God’s elect, abiding with God in love, and secure because God’s ‘grace and mercy are upon her as one of God’s holy ones.’

Now that kind of affirmation is in our power to proclaim as members of Christ’s holy church. For we the church are entrusted to discern in one another the presence and operation of a Christ-like spirit, even in the midst of differing experiences and interpretations of reality. Indeed, even where we observe in one another occurrences that we can rightly call tormenting and punishing, we are also encouraged to believe that those occurrences are transfigured by redemptive features; features like the ones that the apostle Paul proclaims when he describes Christian characteristics as: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control . . .” For, Paul continues:

²⁴ those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25)

Yes, also in our own lives we know places where we feel forces that can well be described as tormenting and punishing. And yet, by faith, we are holding-out that God is doing some transfiguring and redemptive work precisely through such experiences.

In addition, in our Sunday morning class we encouraged each other to practice a kind of spiritual and emotional companionship with one another. This kind of companionship was vividly described a handout called, “Holding Space for Someone Else.” Listen to how this practice is described in the personal growth and development community.

What does it mean to 'hold space' for someone else?

It means we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on, without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome.

When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control.

Now I’ll say a bit more about this practice in a few moments. But first I want to go back to that ego strength of Louise that emerged as the rest of us practiced trying to listen while ‘letting go of judgment and control.’ You know, in our liturgy for Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 308) we have a prayer that describes Louise’s strong character. We pray that God will give us:

the courage to will and to persevere . . . and the gift of joy and wonder in all [God] works.

Well, Louise fulfilled that prayer in our midst. In her determination to be seen and heard she certainly ‘persevered’ among us, and in her love of music and performance she exhibited God’s gift of ‘joy and wonder.’

For our part in class with her, we took on the practice of ‘holding space for her.’ ‘Holding space for someone else’ means inviting others to share their experience, thoughts and feelings while we express ‘unconditional positive regard’ for them.

- Truly unconditional invitations challenge us to be so 'grounded' in our personal attitude and feelings that we do not need or want something particular to happen.
- Rather, we 'hold space' by creating a virtual 'container' for them to explore and make decisions regarding their own needs and concerns without attending to ours.
- Safe space, therefore, requires assurance that we will not 'hijack' or take back that space by using the occasion to exercise our own needs or impulses; by giving advice, for example, or otherwise attempting to direct or control the outcome.
- Unconditional *positive* regard means trusting that other persons' own, inner abilities will suffice to address their needs and concerns if we offer the time, safety and attention.

Now certainly none of us was able to achieve that level of detachment with our beloved Louise. Indeed often enough she herself solicited our advice, and sometimes even presented herself as needing our intervention on her behalf. But in the same way that we hold-out for ourselves—hold-out the faith that God is empowering us to find our way through the thicket of our external as well as our inner life struggles—so we learned that we had to do the same with Louise: to release her into the hands of a loving God so much better able to do for her what none of us could achieve on her behalf.

And that posture of 'holding divine space' for our beloved Louise brings us to our gospel reading chosen for today.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also . . . [For as] ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life . . . (John 14:1-6a)

And so with Louise, our dearly beloved departed one, we affirm our own divine holding space along with hers; affirm that we too with our troubled hearts are also believing in Christ. We are believing that her soul has been vouchsafed to a loving God who prepares a place for both her and us; to take all of us who are 'divinely held' into God's own embrace, so that 'where God is, there we may be also.'

In the name of God:
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
 Creator, Redeemer, Comforter and Sanctifier; Amen