

“To Be Christian is to Remember”

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This time last year, I was sitting in a choir stall, in a huge crowded chapel full of candlelight and community. I was there to observe the feast of All Saints, to witness a baptism and to sing with my seminary’s choir for the first time. I was sitting in a pew listening to one of my dearest friends chant the necrology, the long list of names of the faithful departed in whose memory we prayed that night. I was there to worship, and pray, and sing, and receive the Eucharist. But I spent the majority of the service fighting back tears. By the time I went forward to receive communion, I was swallowing sobs. I wasn’t crying because I was sad, or because I was moved by the beauty of the liturgy or the words of the sermon, although all of those things were true. I was crying because, months after losing someone I loved, I heard her name spoken by another person. I was crying because my community was giving me permission to remember.

It is often the case when someone close to you dies, that everyone around you stops saying their name. When my little sister’s best friend died of cancer last summer, people suddenly stopped talking about her, stopped saying her name around us, stopped telling stories that involved her. People changed their profile pictures on Facebook and posted long statuses about how incredible she was and how much she would be missed. But in conversation, it was like doing gymnastics through a minefield. If we brought her up, or said her name, most people would fall silent, or get uncomfortable and change the subject. With few exceptions, if the tears sprung to my eyes or the hole opened up in my stomach, I felt duty-bound to leave the room, to spare others the reality of my pain and grief. It felt like there was some unspoken rule against remembering.

That day a year ago in the candlelit cavern of a chapel, I realized what it really means to remember. And with that, I learned more deeply what it means to be a Christian. As Christians, we do not run from our dead. We say their names. We pray for the faithful ones we cannot see by name, in our hearts and in our liturgies and

in our gifts to God's church in their memory. We say their names because when we speak of our dead we not only remember, but we are re-membered. We are made whole again, reunited in the body of many members promised to us in baptism. When we remember our dead, we are putting ourselves back together again and again. The strength of the hope we have in Christ is never more visible and tangible than when we pray for the saints who have entered into joy, because in the very act of remembering, we are confessing our faith in Christ's body. We are actively participating in the reunion of that body, in the putting back together of that which God has joined, and which death can never truly put asunder, only part for a time.

At All Saints Camp, the place that taught me how to pray, the campers are given the chance to record their contributions to the prayers of the people on big chalkboards in the shape of crosses. Each cross has a category written at the top; the church, the world, the sick, and so on. Often, especially with the younger groups, there will be questions about what the categories mean, what prayers do, and how to spell the names of various celebrities or countries they have heard about on the news. It is usually a big push near the end of the week to encourage every camper to contribute to every category if they can. Sometimes, whole categories are left blank, to be filled in hurriedly by staff and clergy before the Eucharist. But without fail, every week, with every age group, there is one cross that is so filled with chalk as to be almost illegible. No matter how young, or how old, or what language or religious background they have, every camper knows the name of at least one person or pet who has died. They may never have chosen to pray independently in their life, or they may have the whole prayerbook memorized, but every child understands, instinctually I think, that it is important to remember the dead when we talk to God. As Christians, from the very beginning of our lives, we remember those we have been parted from by death because we believe in the depths of our souls and the very marrow of our bones that God is alive and with God's life our hearts triumph in something more, a life everlasting where our beloved feel no pain or grief, a life where every tear is wiped away and every separation abolished and every relationship sanctified.

To be Christian is to remember, to reassemble, to put back together the broken and the shattered and to wash the feet of the wounded. To be Christian is to look death and grief and pain in the face and say "you are

real, but you are not final.” I think this is what Paul meant when he prayed that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened, that we might know what is the hope to which we have been called. We read the necrology, the spoken deaths, here in this church amidst hymns and scripture readings and the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine because this is what Christians do. This is where we come to put ourselves back together. This is not just a list of those we love who have gone before, either recently or long ago. This is a family reunion.

To remember our dead, our saints, is to claim again and again the victory of Jesus. To say again and again that death does not have the last word, that death could not hold the Word incarnate. Because death has been defeated and will not hold us, we can hold God’s incarnate word in our fragile, mortal, impermanent hands. Because the victory is won and we have been washed in the waters of resurrection, we can look to our left, and to our right at the Eucharist, and know that there isn’t an empty seat in this place, regardless of what our eyes perceive. Because we remember, we are remembered, made whole. Because we remember, we can proclaim the resurrection. We can proclaim the good news even with grief in our chests and tears on our faces because we have been promised reunion by the one whose promises are surer than the sunrise. For we will laugh. For we will be filled. For ours is the kingdom of God.