

What We Need Is Here
All Saints Sunday, November 7, 2021, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Listen first, then sing.

What we need is here.
What we need is here.

Brother Gerald Rivers, who leads our drum circle ministry, always reminds us that there are no mistakes ...just different choices. With that in mind, we're going to sing this again and I'm going to invite us into harmony – and when I do, feel free to either keep the base tune or to explore harmonies that expand the music in different ways

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Sing Harmony

That piece of music was written by Amy McCreath, who is the dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in Boston.

The text is from the poem by Wendell Berry that we heard earlier this morning.

What we need is here.

Berry sings

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

Perhaps more than any other day, All Saints Day invites us to remember all that once was, all who once were, that are no more.

We hear the beautiful, soul-wrenching, requiem music.
We place the pictures on the *ofrenda*.
We look around and see fewer people in this space than have been in previous years, and we miss what was.

That is natural.
That is human.
That is holy.

We grieve loss.

Perhaps the two most debilitating words in the English language are

“I can’t.”

“I can’t” can emerge from the deepest places in us.
“I can’t” can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
“I can’t” can be the death of hope, which can be the death of us.

For every name in this book, for every picture on this *ofrenda*, and for the countless others we carry in our hearts, there are stories of “I can’t.”

They come from the moment of death ... the morning after death ... the countless moments after death when grief comes in waves.

I can’t.

I can’t go on without them.

I can’t make it through this day without crying.

I can’t breathe ... I miss them so much.

“I can’t” is powerful.

“I can’t” is real.

And if you have felt and if you are feeling “I can’t” right now, know that you are not alone.

The absences we feel are so acute.

I love the description of Jesus’ death in Matthew. It is poetry. It is what death of one we love does to us.

The fabric of our faith is torn.

Our foundations are shaken, things that were rock solid are suddenly in pieces.

The memories of losses past come to life as grief touches grief.

The centurion was right to be terrified. Death. Grief. Loss. These things remind us of the deep fragility of our lives. How quickly those whom we love can seem to leave us. How quickly our own life can come to an end.

It can be unbearable.

It can take us to that place where all we can murmur is “I can’t.”

Last month, a friend with whom I have shared nonprofit work for more than a decade shared that she had just been diagnosed with cancer.

I don’t know why, but of all the news like this I have received over the past two years, this one hit me differently. This was a knife wound. It felt like all the blood was leaving my body.

Maybe it was just the last straw after two years of so much death and loss.

Maybe it was the closeness of the anniversary of my own mom’s death from cancer.

Maybe it was that this friend is someone who my whole experience of her is trying to be a part of healing a deeply hurting world one life at a time. Someone who has for me personified joy and hope in the face of the worst of injustice and abuse. Someone for whom my heart finally had to cry out what it had wanted to cry out so many times – NO. You Can’t Take Her!

Whatever it was, when I read the email, it just stopped me. I stared at the screen until the tears filling my eyes blurred the words ... and as I struggled for breath, all I could muster was two words coming up from the depths of my soul:

I can’t.

I can’t take this anymore.

I can’t do this work without her.

I can’t.

I just can’t.

I knew enough to know that I just needed to let myself feel that. Indeed, no feeling is final. And sure enough, that feeling faded, as feelings do. And, as feelings do, it has returned from time to time. I’ve almost begun to recognize it as, if not an old friend, a frequent transient companion, who drops by unannounced, stays as long as it pleases, but, mostly when I reach out to others for help, always eventually departs.

A few weeks later, a whole group of us was together for a planning retreat at her beautiful

home on the ocean, and this friend, who dropped by for a morning between oncologist appointments, shared something with us. A dream she had had. She said:

"I've been thinking about wild geese ever since I had a dream a week or so ago about a whole flock. They were flying in their fabulous V formation. As I watched, the lead bird peeled off to the back taking advantage of the lifting power of the birds in front. Just as they were almost out of view, the new lead bird peeled off to the back and another took her place. And then the v disappeared beyond my sight. That's how wild geese fly so far, how they work together, how they defy the distance and expectations. It was dawn I woke up."

Right away, I thought of Wendell Berry's poem ... and Amy McCreath's song ... and this amazing community of All Saints Church.

I thought of so many faces who look back at us now from this *ofrenda*.

I thought of all the loss we have suffered and are still suffering.

I thought of all the times I have sat or talked or texted with so many of you and heard you say,

"I can't. I just can't."

And I looked at my dear friend, who in that moment didn't and even now still doesn't know if she was talking about merely stepping away from leadership of a ministry or preparing to depart this life.

And I looked around the circle ... at all of us gathered there ... just as I look out on all of us here now.

And just as with her. And just as with Wendell Berry, the wild geese spoke to me.

And as much as I wanted to grab God and shake her and say, "Make it stop! Make this a world where this can't happen anymore," grace interceded, and I heard Wendell Berry's words intertwined with my friend's...

And I prayed, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear.

I looked around the circle ... at all of us gathered there ... just as I look out on all of us here now. Just as I look at the faces gazing at us from this *ofrenda*.

And I realized – What we need is here.

I look at all of you ... at all of us ... and suddenly, I recognize the deep truth of those two words my heart, my soul is crying out.

I can't.

And ... there are two words that are an even deeper truth. And they are the truth of this All Saints Day.

We ... can.

For you see, Wendell Berry was right. We are those wild geese. Generation upon generation upon generation endlessly flying beyond the sight of any one person or point in time.

Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds us to our way – clear in the ancient faith.

And what is that ancient faith?

That what we need is here.

That God our creator is also God our provider.

That God's Holy Spirit is not just a theological concept but the power, the living love that binds us together and lifts us up.

That those who die are not lost. They have just peeled off and are flying out of sight of we who are looking forward. There the beat of their wings is still lifting us, and we are lifting them.

That love not only heals ... love connects ... love lifts ... love propels us forward together.

And when we sing. And when we invite "harmony" and the beauty that is within us emerges and we realize even for a moment the great beauty we are capable of creating. They are singing with us, their melodies giving us strength and their harmonies inviting us to risk and make those different choices that will never be mistakes.

Think of that moment when we broke into harmony. That was so beautiful. And it's not just because we have a wonderful choir and great voices here ... though we certainly do.

I have taught that song to so many groups ... some of you have heard me do it. And every time I sing "harmony" the same thing happens.

There is an unsteadiness.

You can feel the "I can't." in the air ... the echoes of so many of us being told from our earliest days "you can't sing" ... so often and so powerfully that we learned to believe it.

There is that moment of glorious messiness as we wrestle with the "I can't" ... and then there is that moment where we realize...

We can.

And it is like the heavenly chorus.

It is never pitch perfect ... and that is what is truly perfect about it. Because perfection is never getting it all right. Perfection is singing together with enough grace and love to make those different choices, to try new things, and to laugh when they don't turn out as planned.

Look around. Keith, for those who are online, can you pan the congregation and the ofrenda, and if you are with us online, know that we know you are here and we are looking at you, too.

Look around.

See the faces that are here ... and the faces that we love but see no longer. And trust, or even try to trust that what feels lost is not lost.

That though our wings are tired, love will not let us fall.

That though "I can't" is as true as it feels, it is merely an invitation to the deeper truth of "We can."

And so together, let us pray not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear.

(sing) What we need is here

What we need is here

What we need is here.

Amen