

Bill Hines

There is a saying that has stayed in my memory over the years. I don't know where I heard it, or why I remembered it... but the saying is this: "We are born alone, and we live alone... and at last we die alone." Maybe it is because of my approaching old age; or maybe it is because I'm a priest that I still harbor this in my memory. So I googled it, and according to the cyber-gods, it was said by none other than Orson Wells, the famous actor, director, radio reader, and raconteur (before he became a spokesman for Gallo). I don't know if it is original with him, but he said it back in the fifties.... The mid-twentieth century, just after World War II. It was an era of skepticism. The western world was suffering from collective post-traumatic stress disorder.... The phrase is emblematic of the modern age, I think. It is an expression of loneliness to be sure, but it also smacks of the pride that comes with brazen American individualism: The so-called self-made man... words uttered by the prophet of the god of self-sufficiency. When I have thought of death, that phrase has always come to mind, and it has always troubled me.... "We are born alone, and we live alone and finally we die alone".... But the thing about that phrase is... that it is just not true.

We have been called, brothers and sisters... baptized into a community of faith whose central ethos is to Love one another; to take care of each other; to

bear each other's burdens; to live not for ourselves, not alone, but as community; recognizing that we are intimately connected to and dependent on each other. That is the vision of the Gospel. Our faith teaches us that in loving our neighbor, we are in fact loving God. So in Christ, that is to say, in Love, we are never alone; because Love rejoices and flourishes in relationship... that is why the life of faith, the spiritual life is not a personal, solitary enterprise. It is communal. It is a journey accompanied with friends.... Because Love won't let us be alone. Love brings us together, because God is drawing all people to Godself, and God is present in, drawn to, community. How do I know this? Well... I've seen it.

I have witnessed Bill in his struggle with the disease that took his life, and I have witnessed the Love and the care that has been given to him by his friends, and that Love and care in no small way enabled Bill to die a noble death. Bill's friends have shouldered a measure of his suffering, his fear, his questions... That is after all what compassion means, literally.... To "suffer with." Friends, I know this to be true: The suffering of this world pales in the face of Love. Death is a moment in time; suffering in the grand scheme is short-lived... but Love is forever. It will never die; and it is stronger than we reckon... And I have discovered in the midst of Bill's ordeal that there is a connection between Love and courage... It is Love that gives us the courage to live... and to die.

You may have noticed that we are using Rite I for our liturgy today. We don't use Rite I on Sundays at All Saints. We use the more contemporary, modern Rite... Rite I for those of you who don't know is basically the liturgy of the 1928 Prayer book that was revised and modernized in 1979 ... Some of us older Episcopalians can recite from memory the liturgy that formed us for our life's journeys. And Bill asked that we use Rite I because the soaring prose of our Anglican tradition represents the church that formed Bill in his youth.... A church that made him the noble and gentle soul that he was and is and will be forever. That's why we come here, is it not... to be shaped by the imaginative language of Love. A shameless plug for going to church! We gather here Sunday after Sunday to be formed by the beauty of holiness... formed by our very prayers, and our music, by our praise... and even today in the shadow of death itself, we celebrate the beauty of the gift of life, and the Love that inspires it.... We gather here to speak of what is at the heart of the human experience, and that is the Love of God.... "The ground of our being", as Paul Tillach puts it... And that Love is carried by each of us, God's people... and it comes as compassion, and sacrifice, and care, and mercy, and welcome, and embrace... the writer of John's Gospel from which we just read calls it, simply enough, *friendship*.... He calls it laying down one's life

for the other... He likens it to the washing of tired and weary feet.... And even Death cannot stand against it.

The world sees what we are doing today as an irony, a paradox... that we would stand at the grave and 'make our song', as the liturgy goes... that we would gather amid our grief and, of all things, celebrate... But that is the alchemy of Love. We grieve, but we celebrate, because we will always Love Bill, and his Love for us will never die.

So travel gently dear, noble and valiant Bill into a life that has changed but not ended. May you stand in God's Love and favor whole and well, being shaped still for the journey ahead. And know dear friend that we stand with you, just as we always have... and just as we always will.... And I know you know... that Love will never let you be alone.