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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

July 31, 2010

Paul G. Holian Memorial Service

The lessons today are taken from Ecclesiastes, 1st Corinthians 13 and John 14, verses 16, but the sermon is really based on Psalm 46.

Now, dear God, we give Paul back to you who gave him to us. Yet, as you didn't lose Paul in giving, so we have not lost him forever by his return. For what is thine is always ours if we are thine, and life is eternal, and love is immortal, and death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. Lift us up, strong son of God, that we may see further, cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly, draw us closer to you, God, that we may know ourselves nearer to Paul who is with thee; that where Paul is and thou art, we too one day may be. Amen

It is an honor to be here as the celebrant at this service for Paul Gerard Holian. Paul was here on a number of occasions when I baptized his grandchildren, and I can remember seeing him in the congregation, but also at the end of the day, shaking his hand and seeing that wonderful smile.

I am honored to be here to day, and I know you are. It is wonderful to have so many of you here on a Saturday afternoon in July, and I know it was not easy getting here. Unfortunately, our traffic can be very difficult on the Cape.

The psalmist writes, "Be still, and know that I am God." Those words are probably difficult for us to hear today as we mourn the death of Paul Holian. These words offer advice that is difficult to heed, even when the stillness comes from God. We are not always to hear God in the in-force silence; we are not always attuned to the sound of God's voice. Our lives are too busy, our calendars are too full, our commitments too scattered, our minds are constantly moving, our lives are a jumble of multitasking noise and motion and energy and purpose. But in the midst of this traditional vacation season, in the shadows of our grief, God whispers to us insistently, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Funerals and memorial services are meant to be a comfort to those who are left behind. It is a time for sadness and for closure. Someone we love and care about is gone. Death is never easy.

Paul was a good man, and we didn't expect his death, especially during this wonderful time of year. Summer is a time for relaxation and rejuvenation and unbridled play. These last few weeks have been filled with grief, uncertainty and tears, and with the frightening reminder that we are not in control of our lives. "Be still, and know that I am God."

My goal for today is to give vent to the feelings and emotions of Paul's family and friends. I also want to remind everyone that the hope in Christian faith shines brightest at a time like this. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble; therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should tremble, though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea, though its waters rage and foam, the Lord of Host is with, the God of Jacob is our stronghold. Be still, and know that I am God" ... so ends the 46th Psalm.

The truth that is obvious through our tears today is this: we are not as a self sufficient as we think, and while we may be tossed about by the trials and tribulations, the chaos will never, never be victorious. God is a God of hope, God has provided a champion to fight the battles over vulnerabilities we cannot manage. And God will win because God's will is sovereign. God's will for us, I believe, is goodness and life, and God is a God of steadfast love and mercy. God does not desire that anyone should be lost, but willingly gave Jesus that those who believe in Jesus, though they die, might have eternal life. It is the birth, the life, the ministry and resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate today, and we know that Paul believed in God and is with God. It is this belief and hope that shines brightly over the sadness that we may feel today. So, be still in this moment, feel the heartbeat of the Creator who is the author of love. Allow the love in Jesus' heart to bring peace to this moment and a quiet confidence in the difficult days ahead. "Be still," God whispers, "and know that I am God."

God is life, the rest are details; but we do come today to grieve. Sue, and your daughters, and your son, and Paul's brother, and other members of the family and friends, it hurts to lose a husband of forty-two years, a soul friend, a father, a brother, a grandfather, a colleague, a friend.

Even Jesus who we look to, and we try to find where Jesus was really human, in the gospel of John we're told that Jesus is called to the home of Mary and Martha, and on his way he is walking up the walk to their house. He notices that Mary and Martha are crying uncontrollably. They cry out, "Jesus, if you had been here our brother Lazarus, your best friend, would not have died." And it says in the gospel very clearly that Jesus wept.

When we lose someone we love very much, it hurts. And so today we are here to grieve. We are also here to remember. Death cannot take away our memories - the good times, the difficult times near the end of Paul's life, the humorous times, the times we got together, and we played, and we enjoyed life to the fullest.

I understand that Paul liked jokes, so I'm going to share one with you. Please be kind to me this afternoon. (laughter)

A stranger, arriving in a small New England town unlike Pocasset, approaches the first native he saw and asked, "Have you a criminal lawyer in the town?" "Well," replied the native Cape Coder cautiously, "we think we have, but so far we can't prove it on him."
(laughter)

Be kind. I understand he liked lawyer jokes.

Yesterday when I met with the family in their home, they told me how much Paul loved life. He loved to read. He loved his family. He loved his wife, and even near the end being able to say that Sue was the love of his life. He loved his country, he was a veteran. He loved being a lawyer, he was a man of integrity. He knew his roots, he never forgot them. He loved being "Poppie" to his grandchildren. He frowned on smoking and drinking. He loved life, and we can remember that because Paul touched each of us in a special way, and those memories can never be taken away, and his spirit will live in us because we have those memories.

And finally, we celebrate the fact today that Paul is with God, that Paul is with his father and his mother and his sisters Barbara and Alice, and all those he has loved and have gone to be in God's presence. Paul, it was hard for you in this life to be still, but you did know God, and in that knowledge, you have been a good and faithful servant. We love you now and always, and we will see you again.

God of the spirit of all flesh, we bless thy holy name for all who have completed their earthly course in thy faith and fear and are now at rest. We remember before thee this day thy servant Paul Holian, rendering thanks to thee for the gift of his friendship, and for Paul's life of service and devotion; and in thy loving wisdom and almighty power, work in Paul we beseech thee as in us, the good purpose of thy holy will through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

[\[Back\]](#)