

Sermon Soul Mending After a Loss
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels, 10.8.23

It's great to be back! I wasn't gone long, just at our annual Diocesan Convention on Friday and Saturday, but, when I pulled into All Angels' parking lot this morning, I was full of joy and I said out loud, "Yay, I'm home!"

This was the first convention we've had in person since 2019. October 2020 was on-line as was 2021. October 2022 was supposed to be at the Port Charlotte Convention Center but, three days before, Hurricane Ian passed through and the center was a shelter and makeshift command center. But now, four years later, we did it; we had 284 delegates, over 100 clergy and spouses and youth and visitors. It was great. Also, this year, I led a workshop with my clergy friends, the Very Rev. Alex Andujar and the Very Rev. Michelle Robertshaw. The workshop was titled, *Soul Mending After a Loss*. The premise was that after a hurricane, or arson, or a pandemic, the buildings restored and the worship life of the church continues but, the leaders, the people, the clergy, are wounded – their soul is wounded – and needs to be mended.

For instance, Alex's church had an arson fire. Six months after the repairs were completed, there was something wrong with his Vestry – they were angry and closed off. He needed to help them mend, mentally, emotionally and spiritually from that violation of their property (even though it had all been repaired nicely).

To understand soul mending after a loss, it is based on the belief that we are spiritual beings in a physical world. We're not physical beings in a spiritual world; no, we're spiritual beings in a physical body in a physical world. We talk of things physically, about the soul, but it is only in metaphor. For example, when we get a cut on our skin, we clean it, bandage it, and then keep it isolated so it can heal. When our soul needs mending, the opposite of how we handle the physical is how we treat it. When a soul is harmed, it needs to be recognized – that it has been harmed or damaged or violated – then cleaned, drained, and mended but not in isolation but as an open wound. The open wound of the soul is where we share that we have been harmed and we say it in a supportive community; like church. We do more funerals at All Angels than baptisms. It's our gift, our calling, our uniqueness in our community of mostly retired people on the island. We're good at doing funerals and memorials. It's a place where we shown our grief, our soul that needs mending, and we show this with others who have been through it. That's the why of why we do Church – to be with other people who know what it's like to have their soul wounded and to see that our soul can heal. Again, not in isolation, like bandaging a wound and putting it in a sling, but rather keeping the wound open, in the air of community, to heal.

You have heard it said that when a bone is broken, it heals stronger than it was before. Same with a scar – the skin is stronger where it was cut than before. I believe the same to be true about our souls. When the soul is damaged, and healed, the soul is stronger than it was before. But, unlike a broken bone or a deep cut, that needs to be isolated, the soul needs to be in community and to express itself in order to heal.

We read from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. Within this safe community – the church of Philippi – and while Paul is in prison and grieving that he is unable to visit them, he writes this: *I have lost everything*. Just before that statement he gives us his impressive resume. He was at the top in religion and in society. He then writes, *I have lost everything for Christ*. When Paul lost everything, he wasn't isolated and alone. He didn't wander off into the desert by himself with his lost; no, he was in a community. That community was in Egypt and he was there for probably three years. During that time, he soul was mended after "losing everything". Paul's soul became healed in community and then he embarked on the greatest of all journeys for an evangelist. I am convinced that Paul would not be able to write and to plant churches as he did without first having his soul mended.

Saturday morning, during the Bishop's address at convention, my phone rang (technically it buzzed because I had it on silence). It was an unknown number from Michigan. A few minutes later, it buzzed again and this time the caller left a message. His name is Geoff and his grandmother is Eleanor Boyer. She passed away in 2003 and her ashes are in the memorial garden at All Angels. Geoff was calling because he had his dad's ashes (Eleanor's son) and wanted to place them with his grandmother's. I called him during a break and we talked at length. Here is his story.

His dad passed away a year and a half ago. Geoff had his dad's ashes in a rather unusual urn. It was a Winnie the Pooh cookie jar. Five days ago, something stirred in him that it was time to let go of his dad's ashes. He remembered that his grandmother was buried at All Angels on Longboat Key. Four days ago, Geoff strapped his dad's ashes – in the Winnie the Pooh cookie jar (with the lid securely taped to the body of the jar with packing tape) – to the back of his Harley Davidson motorcycle and drove down to Longboat. He had just arrived – on Saturday morning during the bishop's address – and didn't know what to do. I have my cell number listed on the door of the office. He saw it and called me. I told him that I'd meet him at 9 a.m. (Sunday morning) and that we would place his father's ashes with his grandmother's. This morning, an hour before this service, I met Geoff. I heard him first, on his Harley. Long wavy grey hair, open white silk shirt, black leather pants and matching boots, he was ready to say goodbye to his dad.

During the bishop's address, he asked why we have church and then asked us what our "why" is. I'd have to say that for All Angels, and for me, our why is soul mending. About being a place to bring your hurts and to walk with others along the way. It is in this special community that we find healing for our souls. It's not about bandaging our souls and keeping them in isolation; no, it's the opposite. It's about driving down from Michigan, with your dad's ashes, and finding rest for his ashes and for your soul. It's a place where we can be in joy and gratitude with each other and also a place to share where we have "lost it all". We do more funerals at All Angels than baptisms. It's our gift, our calling, our uniqueness in our community where we share our grief and find our souls mended with others who have been through it. That's the why of why we do Church. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.