

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

October 27, 2019

All Faithful Departed Requiem

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Week-before-last, a 27-year-old boxer died from injuries he suffered in the ring.¹ That young man's death drew renewed attention to pugilism's costs and recalled ESPN's documentary, *Hero*, about 25-year-old boxer Francisco "Paco" Rodriguez, who died ten years ago next month.² As the short film begins, "El Niño Azteca' fights for a WBA Super-Bantamweight title at the Blue Horizon in Philadelphia." His first match as a father, Rodriguez reassures his bride before leaving her and their newborn daughter in Chicago, saying: "I really feel good. I am going to come back with a belt."

That same night and just three miles away from the Blue Horizon, 22-year-old Ashley Owens is dying from Cystic Fibrosis. Only expected to live until the age of twelve, Ashley had beaten the odds for nearly a decade, but her left lung collapsed earlier that week, careening her into critical condition. Earlier that evening, doctors explain that without a bi-lateral lung transplant, she will not live. Receiving the news, Owens begins penning goodbye letters to her family: "Dear Dad," she writes, "You always told me it is best to remember all the good times and be grateful ..."

Back at the Blue Horizon, the referee stops the fight after ten rounds when Rodriguez can no longer lift his hands to protect himself. El Niño Azteca staggers back to his corner and sits on his stool, still clenching the ropes. Acting strangely, he explains to his cornerman that he feels sleepy, just before his eyes roll back, and he collapses to the mat. After being rushed to the hospital, Rodriguez undergoes three hours of emergency surgery to relieve pressure from his bleeding brain, but doctors cannot overcome the damage already done.



When his wife, Sonia, arrives to Philadelphia the next morning, physicians explain that Paco has no hope of survival. In the ESPN film, the camera then cuts to Paco's father, Evaristo, seated in his family's home. The senior Rodriguez' eyes are swollen and wet as he tells the story of that day, speaking slowly in Spanish: "In that moment, I asked God not to take him, that I would exchange my life for his."

Today we mark the Feast of All Souls, or "All Faithful Departed," a commemoration that The Episcopal Church explains began "in the Tenth Century, [when] it became customary to set aside [a day as an] extension of All Saints," an occasion when "the Church [would remember] that vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of ... the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the Church."³ Among those the Church remembers on this day, we recall our beloved family and friends.

At 7:42 P.M., on November 22, doctors declare Rodriguez brain dead. Three hours later, a representative from the Gifts for Life organ donation program approaches the family, suggesting that Paco would "be very disappointed to see that after all the hard work [he committed] to keep his body in the shape that he kept it, [that his heart would be allowed to stop beating]." The family consents to contribute his organs, and, that night, Ashley Owens receives Rodriguez' lungs. In an interview,⁴ she describes being able to breathe deeply for the very first time in her life, and the screen fills with video of the young woman riding a bicycle.

Paco's heart goes to twenty-six-year-old Alexis Sloane. Born with a genetic condition, her heart could no longer function on its own, requiring her to be connected to a medical device twenty-four hours-a-day, to pump her blood for her. Before the heart transplant, she lived indoors, in a single room, tethered to this machine, for more than two years.

Twenty-four-year-old Meghan Kingsley receives Rodriguez' liver. Her own liver shut down as a side-effect of experimental medication she took to slow a series of benign brain tumors that were robbing her of muscle control and development, and, if unchecked, would eventually rob her of her life. In her interview, Kingsley reports that since the transplant, she has been back in the hospital many times, and whenever she gets "really sick," she pats her liver and encourages her patron: "Come on, Paco, work with me ... Let's get through this."

Vicky Davis, a fifty-seven-year-old mother of two, receives one of Paco's kidneys and his pancreas after surviving three difficult years on a transplant list. In her interview, she asks, "How can you say thank you to someone for a gift like this? ... It's hard [only to] *say* 'thank you;' you've got to [*do*] more."

Four months after Paco's death, his widow, Sonia, asked the Gifts for Life organization for the mailing addresses of the four strangers who received her husband's vital organs. She wrote each of them letters, describing the man she had married not so many years before. Ashley, Alexis, Meghan, and Vicky, in their turn, all wrote back to Sonia, expressing a desire to meet in person, and, "One year after [Rodriguez'] death ... Gifts for Life and ESPN arrange[d] for the four recipients to fly to Chicago, the hometown of "El Niño Azteca."

According to the traditions we inherit, we at Trinity Church remember our beloved on the feast of All Souls. We do so "because we still hold [those who have died] in our love ... [For] our assurance as Christians is that nothing, *not even death*, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁵ In our commemorations today – the singing of the Duruflé *Requiem*, the praying of the Necrology, the sharing of our Remembrance Altar – we announce our continuing connection with those whose lives we carry close to our own. And in the wonder of the union between God's creation and God's heaven, we pronounce that God *binds* the living and the dead – not by carnival crystal balls, but by the power of Love's endurance.

In the ESPN film, the four women first meet one another, sharing their stories of struggle and survival. The next day, they meet the Rodriguez family, including Paco's now seventeen-month-old daughter, Jeanette. The documentary camera pans a room set something like a wedding reception, with a punch bowl and hors d'oeuvres, boxing trophies, and pictures of Paco, all on long, rectangular tables vested in white cloths. The Rodriguez family stands in a receiving line at the doorway, punctuated by Sonia standing at its end, balancing her young daughter on her hip. And while they could justifiably be so many things – angry, indignant, jealous – the family is *gracious*, genuine, and warm.

There is little narration as the four organ recipients enter the room and meet their benefactor's loved ones for the first time: as soon as Meghan, the first through the door, appears, Sonia begins to cry, holding her hand to her mouth and wiping her eyes as she can. The last to enter is Alexis, who received Paco's heart. Paco's mother, Maria, collapses into Alexis' arms and kneels before this stranger with whom she now shares overpowering intimacy. Maria sets her hand on Alexis' chest and repeats aloud, "*mi corazon ... mi corazon ... mi corazon ...*"

Speaking the names of those we love draws them nearer to us, and lifts us nearer to them, as whenever we pray with “Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven.”⁶ Announcing the connection of heaven and earth in the Eucharist, this morning we join the unceasing prayers of those who have died before us – and those faithful departed *fill* this holy space ... from gallery to quire, *fill this holy space*.

As we commemorate All Faithful Departed in this season, we might receive Paco Rodriguez and his family as models of Stewardship, for surely they are – taking what they had been given, even in tragedy, and sharing so generously for the sake of others – but realize that *our* call as Stewards most resembles the four women who *received* their gifts of life ... *for the gifts of life we have received are no less grand!* People of God, **your life is this precious**, and with every rise of your chest, with every beat of your blood, God prays, “*Mi corazon! ... My heart!*” declaring you as significant and beloved, as holy and *good*.

So we take up pen and paper, and we voice our gratuities; we press our hands together, and we pray, “Come on, Lord ... work with me ... let’s get through this;” and we dare ask ourselves, “How can I say thank you to God for a gift like this? ... It’s hard only to *say* ‘thank you;’ I’ve got to *do* more.” We assemble as one Church stretching across time and place ... from generation to generation ... from here and for ever ... professing our faith “not only with our lips, but in our lives,”⁷ a “pledge of our inheritance in that kingdom where there is no death, neither sorrow nor crying, but the fullness of joy.”⁸

In the communion of All Souls,

Amen.

Endnotes

1 Vigdor, Neil. "[Patrick Day, Boxer, Dies After Suffering Brain Injury in the Ring.](#)" *New York Times*. October 16, 2019. According to the *Times* article, Day was "at least the third professional boxer to die this year after suffering a traumatic brain injury in the ring."

2 Isaacson, Melissa. "[Paco Rodriguez dreamed of being a hero.](#)" ESPN. April 18, 2011. I have drawn the quotes in the sermon from both this long-form article and the E:60 film, *Hero*.

3 From "All Faithful Departed," p. 412, in *Lesser Feasts & Fasts*, 1994.

4 Owens received the transplant not long after her boyfriend had proposed to her on what both believed would be her deathbed.

5 From the "Catechism," p. 862, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979.

6 From the Eucharist prayers, as in "Prayer A," p. 362, in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

7 From "The General Thanksgiving," p. 101, in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

8 From the post-Communion prayer appointed for "Burial of the Dead," p. 482, in the *Book of Common Prayer*.