

Memorial Service Homily
Mildred Ann Hyer Naff
December 31, 2014

“Our Hope is in God.”

Good afternoon. I am Fr. Jim Cook, the Rector of St. Andrew’s Church. On behalf of my colleague, Fr. Jeff Huston, and all the members of St. Andrew’s, I welcome you.

I first want to say how glad I am to see you all here. Your presence is a blessing to Mille’s family, and I know they appreciate not only your presence, but also your love, your support, and your prayers.

Our purpose in gathering here this afternoon is three-fold. First, we are bidding a final farewell to someone who was — and I mean this quite literally — so much to so many. But also, we are here to give thanks to God for bringing Mille into our lives. And, finally, we are here to — through the vehicle of liturgy, rite, and song — to releasing Mille into the care of God, who has always loved her, and who loves her still.

For people of faith, funerals and memorial services are a type of Easter service. And so, even though we may be mourning the loss of someone who was so very dear to us, this service — and especially the Bible readings and the prayers — will focus less on the fact that Mille has died, and will focus more on the fact that God has raised her to a new life in His presence.

It is this ability — that, while we are still dealing with the death of a loved-one, to yet hold on the hope of an eternal life in the presence of God — it is this ability that distinguishes Christians from so many other faith groups. And I, for one, firmly believe, and am convinced, that Mille is already in heaven.

And I believe this, not because of anything that Mille might have done, or believed, or professed; but, rather, I believe this because of what God in Christ did for Mille, and for you, and for me. For the death and

resurrection of Jesus, nearly 2,000 years ago, has reconciled all people to God. And so, our hope is in God.

That's why we can celebrate. Of course, we're devastated that someone dear to us has died. But we also have hope; in part because Scripture gives us a vision of what awaits us. So, let's take a moment to think about some of the things we've just heard in those readings.

In the first reading, which was from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah, we were reminded that what awaits each of us — that what Mille is experiencing even as we sit here — is something akin to a celebration feast, where only the best foods are served, and which takes place in an atmosphere of only joy, contentment, and peace. For me, this may be one of God's best promises: That not only does God promise to be with us in this life, but also that we can be with him in the next.

And then we recited what may be one of the most familiar passages from the Bible, the 23rd Psalm. It uniquely speaks to people whose lives are in turmoil; like, for example, when a loved-one has died. Therefore, it's a psalm for survivors, and its promise is that, when we're having a difficult time, when we do not know which way to turn, when we have no idea what's around the next corner, that God is always with us; that God continues to lead us and guide us, protect us and keep us, no matter what.

Our third reading, from Romans 8, is probably one of my favorite passages of Scripture, and I'm so glad it was chosen for this service. When St. Paul penned these words, I can imagine that he was responding to someone who was calling into question the assurances of God's love, compassion, and mercy so often proclaimed in Scripture. And so, to make sure that his point is entirely clear, and that there is no room for doubt, St. Paul wrote:

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

St. Paul really couldn't have made things any clearer, could he?

And then, our reading from John's gospel is like the icing on the cake. For there we are given a glimpse of not only the love of God, but also of the hospitality of God. For the promise made to all of us, is a place in the eternal presence of God; a place that has been prepared especially for each one of us.

When we pause to think about what these readings from Scripture have been telling us — indeed, what they've been assuring us of — we should feel some measure of comfort, even hope hope.

Thus it is my firm conviction — and I hope it's yours as well — that the love of God for Mille continues even to this moment; that Mille has already taken up residence in a new home; and that, while we may be grieving because we have lost someone dear to us, Mille is rejoicing because she has, at long last, truly found, and been found by, God.

Therefore, if there is only one thing that any of you take away from these remarks of mine, I hope it will be this: Mille is at peace.



Now, while I was preparing for this service, I asked Mille's children to provide me with their favorite memories, stories, or anecdotes about Mille. This is what they submitted:

Emily wrote: Thinking of my mom, I will always remember how she opened her home to everyone with a smile on her face and warmth in her heart. Many, many times I was in awe at how she could sit and visit with friends, leaving the room for a few "Mille" seconds only to produce, out of seemingly nowhere, the most delicious meal for everybody. I will always marvel at how easy she made it seem to be the gracious hostess that so many people loved.

Adam wrote: She was a renaissance woman. She did so many of the things expected of women of her generation: raising kids, cooking, taking care of the house, sewing, etc. On top of that, though, she was an artist who

painted, did charcoals, and beautiful embroidery. She was a fantastic swimmer, and got her scuba license when she was 50+ years old. She climbed many of the 14ers in Colorado, camped, snow skied and white water rafted. She got her pilot's license at 18 in 1940, in a time when not many women were pilots. She was a big sports fan, especially OSU and KU. She ran for State Representative in 1962; this was very unusual in Oklahoma at the time, as she was not only a woman but a Republican; even against these odds, she garnered 44% of the vote.

She beamed with pride when talking about her children (5 + 2 foster sons), her grandchildren (22 of them), and her great-grandchildren (32, with the 33rd on the way).

Peter wrote: Mother could provide a feast almost [like the gospel story of] the fish and loaves. One time, and with no prior notice, she had a sit-down dinner for Dad, the Dave Brubeck Quartet and herself. All after a concert, and at about midnight. After dinner Mother & Dad continued to entertain and converse with Dave and the boys until after 3 am. Dave remarked that they usually did not accept after-concert dinner invitations, because it usually meant someone wanted a free home-concert, but this time they just felt it would be different.

Stephen wrote: One of the things that sticks out most in my mind about Mille is her ability to deal with illness and injury with a level head. When I was four years old, I fell a few inches out of a tree and broke my arm. I ran into the house crying and told her my arm hurt. She took one look and knew it was broken but did not want to "scare" me. She kissed my arm, gave me a hug and sent me back out to play. Once the "trauma" was past, she took me to the hospital to get the arm set and [put into a cast].



Thank you all for those remarks.

I did not know Mille as well as many of you, and, to be honest, I'm amazed at what I've learned of Mille from these accounts. But if the past 16 months of my time here at St. Andrew's has assured me of anything, it's

that I could always count on seeing her radiant smile, her bright eyes, and her cheery disposition.

But something else comes to mind in terms of my understanding and appreciation of this remarkable woman: and it's that she really wasn't defined by her culture or social context, or limited by popular convention. In fact, I suspect in some ways she approached those factors that might try to limit her or shape her as simply challenges to overcome: "You don't think I should be doing this? Well, watch me do it anyway."

And as the parents of two daughters, Peggy and I were talking about the fact that it would be hard to find someone who would make a better role model for daughters, or granddaughters, or great-granddaughters. And when we thought about all that Mille accomplished, it was clear to us that she charted her life's course on faith, and not fear.

And so, for me at least, the conclusion is inescapable: Mille Naff was a singular woman, to say the least.



I want to conclude my remarks with two final thoughts.

First, I know that in the days and weeks to come, you will have many opportunities to share with each other your favorite memories and stories about Mille. Well, by all means, do that.

But, in the telling of those stories, remember especially the faithfulness and love which Mille held for her family and friends, and even for strangers who showed up at her doorstep. And then, take those good things which you saw in Mille's life and apply them to your own. I don't think we can offer a better tribute to any person, than to allow that person's life to be a source of inspiration for us.

And, finally, I want to reiterate something I said earlier: Funerals and memorial services are Easter services. They remind us of the promises God has made to us. They remind us of our hope in Christ. And they remind us that each of us is part of something larger than ourselves.

For we are all members of the Body of Christ: A community of faith and hope that has its beginning, and its ending, in the love of God for all his children. But especially, and today, in God's love for Mildred Ann Hyer Naff.

Amen.