

(24th Sunday after Pentecost – All Saints' Sunday)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
All Saints' Sermon
November 4, 2018

"Jesus Wept"
John 11:35

"When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart...For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost." – Frederick Buechner

Last Sunday after worship, I joined the family of Dorothy Rollins at the Key Stone Grill to remember and celebrate her life.

In the evening, Staci and I joined close to a thousand other people of all ages and all faiths at First Unitarian Church in Madison for a vigil honoring the 11 worshipers who were shot and killed in another domestic terrorist attack, this time at The Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

As we gathered, we sang songs of lament shared by the Jewish community of Madison. Towards the end of the service, we stood with our Jewish brothers and sisters, and joined in the Mourners Kaddish. It was said in Hebrew, but you could feel the pain and sorrow in their words of grief over the tragic loss of life.

Grief is a universal feeling. Grief is felt by people of all faiths, in all cultures, and knows no borders.

Last spring, a tragedy rocked the McFarland community with two suicides, one a young freshman girl. The other, a former middle school principal, who still lived in our community, and whose children attended the McFarland schools.

Following the death of the parent, one of my students, a young woman who is Muslim, stayed after class. She wanted to talk with me about how she could be present to her classmate, a friend of hers, whose father had died. She was asking how we as "Christians" approached death and comforted those who grieved in our faith tradition? She was being so sensitive and caring. We all should be.

So I asked her what she and her family would do if someone in their faith community died? And this may surprise you, but Muslims, pretty much what we in our faith would do - be present to the ones who are grieving, grieve with them, bring food, comfort them, and attend to the burial rituals.

I told her to just be a friend, with a few words that we all have offered, "I'm sorry" and then if her classmate needed to talk, she would know you there for her. It really is all we can do when someone dies.

Grief comes to all who love, as do tears.

When his friend, Lazarus, died, the writer of John's Gospel tells us that upon hearing the news, **"Jesus wept."** (John 11:35)

His response I am sure, is pretty much a universal one as well.

Grief and tears, sorrow, anger, shock and disbelief, lament, all are a part of love for another person. And love itself is universal.

All people love. Love is the core of our being. **“God is love and those who love abide in God and God abides in them.”** (1 John 3)

The writer Victor Hugo, in his novel, Les Miserables, says: **“To love another is to see the face of God.”**

In all human beings, the sacred presence of our Creator, is fully present. It is why we love.

Love is universal. It knows no borders. It is found in all faith traditions, all cultures.

As those who are created in God's image, Love is our calling and command by Christ. And if we love, and we all do, we will grieve.

Last Sunday evening, Staci and I stood in foyer of the First Unitarian Church in Madison. We joined many of clergy colleagues and few of Staci's church members, along side of strangers, strangers, who were, like us, there to stand with our Jewish brothers and sisters who were grieving the loss of 11 souls created in God's image. We were a community of faith, reflecting the fullness of God's sacred image of Love in the face of anguish, pain, sorrow and death.

We were a community of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hispanics, Buddhists, Hindus, LGBTQ+, Transgendered gathered in the Spirit of God's love to grieve together.

At the conclusion of the vigil of remembrance, we stood as one community, to share in the Jewish tradition of saying the Mourners Kaddish, a sacred prayer, similar to our sacred liturgy we say at church funerals.

It was said in Hebrew, and while most of us did not speak Hebrew, we all understood what was being said, because grief is a universal language we all understand.

One of the meditations offered before the Jewish community says Kaddish is this: **“When I die give what's left of me away to children and old men that wait to die. And if you need to cry, cry for your brother walking the street beside you. And when you need me, put your arms around anyone and give them what you need to give me. I want to leave you something, something better than words or sounds. Look for me in the people I've known or loved, and if you cannot give me away, at least let me live in your eyes and not in your mind. You can love me best by letting hands touch hands, and by letting go of children that need to be free. Love doesn't die, people do. So, when all that's left of me is love, give me away.”**

Beautiful words.

Today, is All Saints' Sunday. All Saints' Day is November 1. Centuries ago, the Catholic Church made the day after All Hallows Eve, a sacred holiday to counter the pagan holiday we now call Halloween. It is a day to remember those who we have loved and lost over the past year. We remember them by saying their names, lighting candles, and offering prayers.

As we remember their names and light our candles, let us also remember these words of faith we proclaim: **“Nothing in life or in death can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**
Amen.

Building the Bridge Between the Kings and the Prophets

Saul, David, and Solomon, these are three of the most familiar and famous (though infamous might also be used to describe them) of the kings who ruled over the nation of Israel at its beginning. They are also the only three to rule over the nation of Israel.

As I mentioned last week, King Solomon, while wise in some ways, could not rule over his own ego and desires. His lust for power, women, and wealth bankrupted the kingdom of Israel. Following his rule, the kingdom of Israel was, as Solomon had proposed doing with a baby in our story last week, actually divided into two with the sword coming into play. The northern kingdom continued to be called Israel. The southern kingdom was Judah.

Kings still ruled over the divided kingdoms. And those kings, like Saul, David and Solomon, who called to serve the people, abused their political power, failing ethically and morally in God's eyes, creating conflict and chaos, more wars, violence and death.

To call these powerful political leaders back to their God sent prophets to confront and challenge them. It is to the words and actions of the prophets our Narrative Lectionary stories turn now. We will be hearing from the Prophets Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. The words of those prophets should sound familiar to you. But before we get to those stories, we meet up with the Prophet Elisha.

In this story from 2 Kings, we hear what might be a new story to many of you. It is an appropriate transition story moving us from the power and privilege of rulers and military leaders to the vulnerable and lowly who speak on God's behalf.

This morning, our story takes place in the Northern Kingdom. We meet Naaman, commander of the army of Aram, which borders the Northern Kingdom, in what is known as modern day Syria. Naaman is a powerful man who is used to being in control. People do as he commands them to do. But he has a problem he cannot control. He has leprosy. And like many of us who have suffered a disease or life-changing illness, he seeks healing.

Naaman is about to meet a young woman who was taken prisoner during war, and forced into slavery to serve another master. As a servant she has no power. Yet, she also serves one who is more powerful than Naaman has ever met. In her lowly position of vulnerability and weakness, she serves God first. And shows us by her words and actions, how to love even her enemy. We will also meet the Prophet Elisha, though as you will hear, doesn't even bother to come to the door to greet the powerful Naaman. What do you make of that?

Oh, and there is the Jordan River too. A geographical landmark, sacred and holy to many, it is if you have ever been to it, a muddy little creek. Who would want to dip themselves into it, even if God told you to in order to be healed? Would you?

As we listen to this story, think about the differences between the powerful and the lowly, and all you have had to do to seek a cure for your own afflictions and ills in your life.

Invitation to Stations of Remembrance

This morning we will be remembering our loved one through this special All Saints' Liturgy followed by visits to four different stations of remembrance. There is no particular order to them.

At the baptism font is two small bowls. One is filled with salt, symboling our bitter memories. The other is sugar, symboling our sweet memories. Please take a pinch of each, drop them together into the waters, and then touch your forehead as a sign of remembrance.

At the small table is a basket of tea candles. You are invited to light one from the Christ Candle, placing it on the table as a symbol of remembrance of a loved one.

In the middle is the Communion station. You may take a piece of bread from the plate, dip it into the cup, partake, and move to another station or return to your seat.

The fourth station is a special prayer for healing and wholeness in the midst of our grief, which as we know, is a lifelong process. I will be there to offer you a blessing and an anointing.

You may visit any or all of them or sit quietly in your seat. Angie will be playing soft piano music. We will conclude with a prayer.