

The Ties that Bind

November 21, 2021

Memorial Sunday

Churches all across the country, and across the world, take time this month to commemorate their beloved departed. Some call this a celebration of All Saints and All Souls. In Germany it's called Totenfest. Here, we call it Memorial Sunday.

Today we are building a Memorial Altar, similar to those in the Mexican tradition of Dia de los Muertos. Samuel Cruz of Union Theological Seminary notes that part of the spirituality of Dia de los Muertos is the idea that, "Those ancestors who have passed are believed to have entered a higher plane of existence from which they can provide guidance and support to the living." Dia de los Muertos altars, or Ofrendas, are finding their way into more and more Christian celebrations of our beloved departed, as we, too, acknowledge two things: we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us, and their wisdom is still important to us and accessible to us.

Our celebration of Memorial Sunday isn't just to remember our deceased loved ones fondly, it is to acknowledge the debt we owe them, and the influence they still have in our lives, all while giving thanks to God for this wondrous, complex, messy experience of love.

Wisdom

In our Hebrew Scripture passage from the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the deuterocanonical books of the Bible which Luther said was good for teaching even though he didn't believe it was divinely inspired, we hear a beautiful and comforting reassurance that, "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them." There is such a deep comfort, a deep peace, that pervades that passage.

And then, for Memorial Sunday, the lectionary assigns the passage we just read from the Gospel of John. We read the story of the raising of Lazarus. It's another beautiful, powerful reading. In the Gospel of John, it serves the critical function of explaining why the authorities finally decide to kill Jesus: if he can raise people from the dead, there is no limit to how many supporters he could rally against them.

But in today's context, as we celebrate Memorial Sunday, reading the story of the raising of Lazarus almost feels cruel. Sure, it does show us an intimate picture of grieving, with denial, bargaining, and anger all on display. But it still seems cruel. It begs the question: Why didn't Jesus raise my loved one, if he did it for Martha and Mary?

Didn't I pray hard enough?

Didn't we love them well enough?

Didn't we love Jesus well enough?

Does our loved one's death somehow demonstrate that Jesus doesn't love us, or at least loves us less?

Unbind Him

Most of you know that my dad died four years ago, and it was really hard. I've always been a "daddy's girl," and he was a phenomenal man, making every community he was a part of a better place. What I'm sure none of you remember is that this was the Gospel passage the Sunday before he died. This was the Gospel I had just preached on. This was the Gospel still rattling around in my brain and asking me to Monday morning quarterback. This was the Gospel in my head when I got my mom's call and sped down to the hospital.

We knew his cancer had metastasized, but he had been on the court the day before, coaching my brother's Special Olympics basketball team. We were incredulous. The end couldn't be here already. He squeezed my hand when I got to his bedside, and mouthed, "love you" even though no sound came out.

We all gathered. My mom, sisters, brothers-in-law, niece and all but one nephew. Most of them cycled in and out of the room for the next hours. I couldn't budge. When it became clear that he wasn't going to make it, we decided to have him intubated, so that my nephew who was at UW-Stout could have time to make it down to say goodbye. The last words my daddy ever spoke were "Thank you" to the nurse as she was about to put the breathing tube in.

If you've ever spent much time around death, you know that it's not always gentle. Often, our bodies fight it. It cut me to the core when the hospital staff had to tie my dad's hands to the arms of the bed, so that they wouldn't flail about and hurt one of us or pull out any tubes or cords.

My nephew arrived around 11 p.m., had some time with grandpa, and then we told the staff it was time to extubate him. After that, for the next hour or so, we were all in the room. He felt us holding his hands. The last words he heard were prayer.

When he breathed his last, no one wanted to go. It was probably another hour that we all hovered around his bed, not being willing to let go.

My husband and brothers-in-law left first, then sisters, mom. I couldn't make myself go. After close to two hours, I finally found a way to get up, leaving dad's body with just my nephews.

As I walked out, I turned around and leaned on the doorway, not wanting to cross the threshold into a world where my dad wasn't. There, I saw my nephews, the only people left in the room, these 20-something macho men, standing at either side of grandpa's hospital bed, untying the restraints from around his wrists. It was the singularly most sacred act I have ever witnessed.

Our Gospel passage for today ends with Jesus saying, "Unbind him, and let him go." What if, the lesson we are to take from this passage today isn't that Lazarus had a few more good years with Mary and Martha? What if, the lesson isn't the power of prayer? What if, our

take-away isn't that we should yearn for as deep and intimate of a relationship with Jesus as Lazarus had?

But rather, "Unbind him, and let him go"? What if the Memorial Sunday witness of this passage is that we still have access to our beloveds, that they are still very much a part of our lives, but that we cannot keep them bound up in the cloths of the tomb.

OR, what if, in this verse, Jesus is speaking about you? Unbind yourself, and let go. Don't allow the wrappings of death to hamstring your living. You're not dead. Live. Now.

Conclusion

Friends, this is the Good News: That we, the living, can have life after death. That Jesus not only transforms our experience beyond the grave, but also on this side of the grave. As we celebrate our loved ones who have died this Memorial Sunday, we not only celebrate that we stand on their shoulders and continue to be influenced by their wisdom. We not only celebrate the promise from the Wisdom of Solomon that, when we die, we will abide with God in love. We also celebrate that there is no tomb so deep, no grief so dark, no existence so bleak, that the voice of Jesus cannot reach into it, call our names, and bring forth new life.

My prayer for all of us this week, and especially for those of us who are still mourning, is that we will have the courage to hear Jesus calling our names, calling us out of the echoey, cold, darkness of the tomb and into the fullness of the sunshine of life. Let us allow ourselves to be unbound, and in doing so, allow God to work the miracle of resurrection in our lives.

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Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9, John 11:32-44
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