

“What do these Stones Mean?”

Joshua 4:10-11, 15-24

Philippians 3:20-4:3

My Mom used to oversee mental health and substance abuse treatment at the local jail as part of her work. While she was there, she met this woman named Sherry – an assistant administrator with a big heart and a lot of ideas about how to change the lives of the inmates there. She got to know them, visiting their cell blocks, offering words of encouragement. She developed programs so that they could grow and change. She was enthusiastic and everyone knew that she truly cared about how they were doing and how she could help.

Several years ago, she died and my Mom went to the funeral. Mom was overcome by how many people were there – people she recognized from the jail and many others. One by one, they shared stories about her life – all the beautiful things she had done and how she had changed their lives. Mom was particularly delighted by a story that her two daughters told. Apparently, in addition to wanting to help rehabilitate people, Sherry really wanted to help rehabilitate plants. Her daughters said that it was a pretty common occurrence that they would come home from work only to find the saddest, most bedraggled looking, half dead plants on their porches. Sherry just knew if they had a good home and the right love and attention, that they would be lush and green once more. Her daughters said she was famous for her, “drive-by plantings.”

My mom was struck by the fact that this story was...well, it was the essence of Sherry. Even though mom only knew her through work, had never met her family, didn't know a thing about this quirky plant hobby...this was Sherry through and through. It's something that so often happens at funerals and part of what can make them so meaningful. We gather with a room full of people – some known to us, some unknown. Even when it's close friends and family, everyone has a different experience with the person who has died; their own unique relationship.

When we grieve, the sorrow and heartache can make us feel so isolated, so disconnected. Yet, at a funeral, we can hear stories like the “drive-by planting” story and say, “yes! That’s her.” We can immediately see the light of that life as it shone into so many others. We can see that we are not alone, marvel and celebrate how much there is yet to know and share and cherish.

One of the many things that has made this pandemic so difficult is the way that it has limited our ability to come together. No matter what protocols we put in place, we know that there are those who cannot gather to grieve even though their hearts are breaking. We still remember how holy and beautiful the lives of the saints are, but it’s like we’re being robbed – not just of their presence among us, but also of the treasure of sharing those stories with a grieving community. When we see that we are surrounded by so many who share love of one close to us, it is balm for our spirit. Without it, what becomes of our wounds?

In our letter to the Philippians this morning, we join the apostle Paul as he writes to them from prison. He has great love for the church in Philippi, but it is so hard for him to be separated from them. Still, he wants to encourage them to stay on the right path, to be faithful, not to give up hope despite their suffering. He writes that he loves them, he misses them. He calls them, “my joy and crown.” And we can see a glimpse into the love that connects the saints – living and working and striving together. The crown was not like the crown of a king or a prince. It was the wreath that an athlete would win in the Olympic games. It was a victory that came from hard work (not from who your parents happened to be). It was a mark of honor.

And when we look at “joy” – this is so much more than a nice, glow-y feeling in our hearts. The word for “joy” in Greek has the same root as the word for “grace,” like the grace of God. So, one way to think about “joy” would be to say that joy is how we feel when we are

experiencing God's grace. Or, perhaps better put, joy is how we feel when we are aware that we are experiencing God's grace.

This is what it is to be connected to the saints – to see and feel God's grace close to us and to remember the crown of life that awaits us as we strive to do what we can to be loving and just in God's name. Paul remembers and glories in the memories of having worked and struggled together with so many over his life. He longs for the days when he can be free and minister on the outside once more.

So, he reminds this little church – maybe he is even reminding himself – that, “our citizenship is in heaven.” We are a community, we are an ongoing conversation, we are brothers and sisters joined forever no matter what we face. He doesn't pretend like they aren't all having a hard time. He says that Jesus, “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” This isn't “humiliation” in the sense of personal shame. This is more like humble circumstances, loss, lack, even low social status. Whatever we feel we are losing, we do not need to fear. We are being transformed in the glory of Christ day by day.

There are fractures in our lives: things that feel disrupted and incomplete, dear saints who were taken from us too soon. And yet...in God we are forever connected. When we turn to our reading from the book of Joshua, we find a miracle that we talk about a little less often. We tend to talk about God parting the Red Sea and the Israelites walking across on dry ground when the people left Egypt. It's easy for us to forget that God also parted the Jordan River when the people entered the promised land. As soon as the people crossed through the Jordan, they made camp at Gilgal – a place whose name may mean, “circle of stones.”

And God told them that the first thing they needed to do would be to take twelve stones, which they had gathered from the middle of the Jordan River and set up a memorial. This is

twelve stones for twelve tribes. Each group had its own reminder of what God had done that day. God told them to set up this memorial so that children would ask their parents – “what do these stones mean?” God didn’t just tell the parents to teach their children what had happened. No, God said – make a monument. Create something new so that your children and families and passersby will want to know. What happened here? What does it mean? And then, then you will have a moment to speak in awe and praise. Then you can remember how mighty and awesome the Lord your God is.

Just like the stories that we share at funerals and in the depths of our grief, these memorials show us something deeper than our own sense of unease and sorrow. We may marvel when we ponder how many lives all around us were touched by one, single life. Indeed, one of the great ways that we honor loved ones who have died is by doing what we can to carry on their legacy to us in the way we live our lives. But how often do we think about the light of goodness itself? The courage that I learn from you may be from your great-grandmother who I will never know. The loyalty you show may be from a childhood friend, a cousin, a neighbor – a perfect stranger you encountered once. Every one of us learned to live in the light from many, many others. Those, in turn, were taught by countless more and on and on since time began. The light of goodness that is in you and in me – it’s not our own. It is the gift of the Spirit, given through the lives of the saints. Each flicker of light we encounter is but one of many stepping stones that God has placed in our lives to help us choose the good.

Today, we celebrate All Saints’ Day. We remember all those who have gone before us, the doors that they opened for future generations, and the possibilities of hope – even in these stressful days. Soon, we will read a list of names of those we are grieving in our hearts as well as a word about what they have taught us. As we pray together and in silence, let us cherish the

saints who remind us that heaven is our home, that goodness is possible, that the grace of God will not fail us. Let us join the children, looking at the memorial of their lives and ask: “what do these stones mean?” Amen.