**God, With Us in Grief: In Memoriam Sunday**

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John 11:28-37

28When [Martha] had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Hebrews 12:1-2a (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

It has been a year of losses. As we look back and name those loved ones who have died this year, we feel our grief made heavier in that we were not able to gather to share that grief in community, to gather to say goodbye to loved ones in funerals and memorial services. We feel the loss of the ongoing need to be so vigilant about our health and to distance ourselves from gathering in person with loved ones – friends, family, this faith community. We feel the loss of so many lives to the Covid-19 pandemic. It’s been a year of many losses.

I watched an interview recently with a pastor named Stephanie Lobdell. She wrote a book called *Signs of Life: Resurrecting Hope Out of Ordinary Losses* (Herald Press, 2020). In it, she tells the story of finding her way through her own “ordinary” losses and setbacks, including being diagnosed with anxiety and depression in the middle of her seminary training. For Lobdell, this was a devastating diagnosis, as she questioned her entire calling to ministry in light of it. Where was God in this? How could she still fulfill her hopes of working in ministry as someone living with anxiety and depression? She eventually came to a place of knowing the importance of facing the loss, not denying it or distracting oneself from it, but facing it and saying, “This loss, this failure, this pain, this diagnosis is not the end of the road for me. [God] is still present in this space but I need to be honest about what hurts. … God meets us in that space.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This In Memoriam service is one of the rituals of the church that does exactly that: allows us to name our loved ones and the loss that we feel and the sacredness of our love for them. We are given safe space to name that here, and face it. And we can see that God meets us here, that God knows about loss and pain, in the passage from John 11. If you’ve been part of Bible quizzing or Bible trivia games, you might know this story because it contains the shortest verse in the Bible. Does anyone remember what that is? “Jesus wept” (verse 35). Trivia questions aside, it is one of the most profound verses of the Bible, because it shows us a very human Jesus, and the compassion and grief of God-With-Us. On hearing of the death of his dear friend Lazarus, in meeting his dear friends Mary and Martha, who are deep in grief over the loss of their brother, Jesus begins to cry. God in Christ has experienced the pain of losing a loved one; God knows grief, and therefore God grieves with us when we grieve, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We do not have to carry those burdens alone.

We also are not alone because, as the apostle Paul says in Hebrews 12, “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” In maybe the most famous sports analogy of the whole Bible, Paul compares our forbears in faith, our spiritual and literal ancestors, to a crowd cheering on the runners of a race. With the encouragement of that cloud of witnesses, we are empowered to run with “perseverance” – to follow Jesus who is the “pioneer” of our faith, who gives us strength for the journey. Coming back to Stephanie Lobdell, she recounts how a professor of hers showed her a way forward. This prof shared about their own depression when she confided in them that she had just been diagnosed. The professor told her, “Me, too. I also have depression. And every morning, when I take my medication, I say to myself, today this is God’s means of grace for me.” And this shows us another understanding of that term “cloud of witnesses” – the people who shaped us into who we are today, the people through whom we experienced – or continue to experience – God’s grace.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Whenever we come to In Memoriam Sunday or Eternity Sunday, I always remember my grandmother, Anne, who died in 2007. She was the grandparent I was closest to, and whom I got to know toward the end of her life, when she was losing her memory. We always think of ourselves as independent individuals but when someone loses their memory, as my grandma did, we had to remember for her who she was. We are shaped and upheld by our clouds of witnesses, both living and dead. And now that my grandma is gone, I continue to remember who she was, and she continues to shape who I am. We bear witness to each other’s lives, in this way. And in this way, remembrance is a type of resurrection.

As we gather around the Communion table today, whether here in person or from our homes, maybe we are reminded of those with whom we cannot gather around tables today, whether we’re separated by the pandemic or by death. Let’s remember that Jesus sometimes broke bread with only two people in their home, as in the Emmaus Road story (Luke 24). Communion does not depend on sheer numbers. In the Jewish tradition, there is a beautiful ritual that is part of the Seder meal commemorating the Passover story in Exodus. At their Passover meals in their homes, each family leaves one chair empty at the table for the prophet Elijah. It is a gesture of hope for his return. I know we have many empty seats here in our sanctuary as we celebrate Communion this morning. Maybe you have empty chairs around your table at home as you celebrate communion from a distance. Maybe you are lamenting the empty chairs you will have around your table this Christmas as well. But know this: God knows pain. God knows the grief of loss. God meets us there, and is present across the distance, gathering us under God’s wings.

So as we share the bread and cup from wherever we are, may these empty chairs symbolize the hope of coming together again, and the type of remembrance that holds resurrection power. Let us hope in the knowledge that we are united by God’s presence even now, across the distance, as we recognize Jesus the Christ in the breaking of the bread. Our Communion liturgy this morning includes the words of Jan Richardson, from her prayer, “And the Table Will Be Wide.” As we celebrate Communion across the distance, may our table be widened to welcome and include all of us, so that, as Richardson says, “everywhere will be the feast.”[[3]](#footnote-3) AMEN

1. Go to the website below and click on “Interview” to listen to a conversation between Stephanie Lobdell and Amy Gingerich of Menno Media: <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/82/20292> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is also part of the conversation between Stephanie Lobdell and Amy Gingerich: click on “Interview” on the following website: <https://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/82/20292> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jan Richardson, “And the Table Will Be Wide: A Blessing for World Communion Sunday,” <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)