

Sermon May 29 2022, Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE: John 17:20-26

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

SERMON: “Final Prayers” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Within a memorial service, there is a familiar arc that lends itself to the particulars of the person that we have come to remember. There are prayers and songs we come to expect. There are rhythms and routines that unfold to give us peace. And yet one of the most profound and powerful moments of any memorial is when people get up to tell stories, when they testify to the person that they are remembering. And despite the solemnity of the service, what is amazing is that within those stories, there are often colorful bits of examples that bring that person to life in ways we might not have expected. There is truth that in any memorial everyone learns something about the person that we have come to honor.

I remember the funeral for Max Stackhouse, a man of deep faith, a man of powerful theology. And I remember the story of the science kits. The science kits that someone talked about that the Stackhouses and those they went with to that *dry* lakeside retreat center. The science kits that they brought, you know, to do science with in the evenings, to draw closer together. You know, *science kits* in that alcohol-free, dry camp! For that to be a story about Max Stackhouse somehow knit together his whole power and life and zest for living in new ways.

I remember almost the same week was another story about Michelle Gillett, and how when she would go to dinner with Chuck and with friends, they would get used to a routine, which is that they would have time to make it to their table, to sit and get comfortable, and maybe even enjoy a science kit, before Michelle finally said hello to everyone she knew on the way back to the table, and was able to join them.

At my step-mom’s memorial, there was a story offered by my sister that none of us knew. I will simply say this: the story involved a bra and the story had a profound impact on my sister and the way she saw living life and being a woman. And it was a story that added new layers to a woman that I so deeply admired.

It turns out the moments and the stories and those incidents bring a person into focus. They’re so critical to how we end up remembering them. In my own mind, I remember so many stories about so many people. But I also know that as time goes on, eventually the full essence of the

person also comes into better focus. And often that essence, beyond any particular story or incident, but instead an essence that pervades all the stories and incidents, are often about moments I have long ago forgotten, but that make all the difference.

In John's gospel, after Jesus' death and resurrection, John's disciples told story after story about all kinds of moments they had witnessed when Jesus was, well, Jesus. They would say do you remember that time at that wedding in Cana, that time when water for purification was changed for wine for celebration, all 132 gallons of it? So much purification imagined needed, and yet so much joy poured out instead. They would say do you remember that man of power, that centurion that found himself powerless in the face of his son's dire illness, and Jesus just spoke that word of love and all was well. Yeah, yeah, but do you remember that time when there was that man who had been ill for 38 years and always at the gate of the pool, so close to being healed, and everyone rushed by to get their own healing rather than helping him, and how Jesus said get up and walk. Oh yeah, but do you remember that time when Jesus – there were 5,000 people there hungry, remember, for teaching and for feeding – and remember how Jesus fed them all. Or wait, do you remember that time when Jesus defied everything that we knew to calm the seas, but more importantly, the disciples' fears. Huh, oh yeah, but I remember that time when Jesus restored the sight, not just of the one who had lived all of his life blind, but for everyone around him who had, too. I imagine if those stories weren't enough, there was of course the one where Mary's weeping brought about resurrection for Lazarus. There was the nard from the other Mary, there was the washing of the feet. I bet the disciples were armed with more stories than you could count.

And yet this passage that we read this morning is in the final moment that Jesus would spend with his disciples before the cross. All of his life's work, all of that teaching and healing, all of that walking and working, all of it was done. All that lay before Jesus was the passion, and the glory, the restoration and the hope. All that lay before Jesus and his disciples at that moment was something that seemed hopeless. It was in that moment, this moment that our reader brought to life, that I think Jesus' full essence is on display for us. This is a story that is almost always forgotten. It is a story that is brushed past and usually not used. And here it is on the final Sunday in Easter, that final moment of resurrection, that thing that seems so impossible, where John's gospel points us right back at this moment.

And I think it is perfect, not just for Easter, but perfect for this horrible week we've all just experienced. For this is the last moment of connection, before the powers of earth were going to do their worst, and the powers of God would do her best. And in that moment, Jesus did not choose one more lesson. In that moment, Jesus didn't say I'm going to dazzle you one more time with a miracle so great you can't forget it. He didn't offer yet one more thing that they could tell about. Well, maybe he did. Maybe he did all those things at once. Because what he did in that liminal space was he simply prayed.

In this story in John's gospel, Jesus doesn't seek a quiet place, Jesus doesn't go off by himself to pray. In this moment, Jesus prays with all of them gathered around. Just like sitting with the kids on that carpet during children's time, where young Gwendolyn so beautifully said I don't know that prayer yet, Jesus takes one more crack at the thing that he knows will save them. And if you listened to today's passage, just might save us too, because this prayer wasn't just for the

disciples. Do you remember what the passage said? I pray not just for those here, but for all who will come to believe in me through the disciples' work. And friends, that is you and me.

And so, on this morning in this liminal space, with those amazing kids out there experiencing life, Jesus gives us what we need. And that is the reminder of not just what is prayer, but why we do it, and the content of his prayer this morning. Jesus says for all you will give their hearts to me, I pray this prayer. Jesus doesn't pray for any particular power. He doesn't give to one of them this kind of miracle, and another that kind of miracle, and to that one this kind of speaking. But instead, he prays for the grounding that leads to all and any power. At least all and any power of goodness.

This moment has captured the imagination of the United Church of Christ. It's right on our logo. What Jesus prays more than anything is that all of us might be one. May they be one, Jesus says. Not one party, not one nation, not one perspective, not one mindset. Might we be one, not because we are all the same, but one as the Father and Jesus are one. One as the Trinity is one. One, where we all get to be our own beautiful, God-given selves with all of our unique gifts, where we are independent, but also importantly, interdependent. One where we are distinct and in fact need to look at each other to see the gifts of God if we are to see the whole gift of God. Distinct yet totally unified. Powerful yet dedicated to loving service. Eternal like God is, yet willing to love sacrifice and even experience death. And by the way, if you remember, Jesus said not just for a friend or compatriot, but for stranger and even enemy, too.

I think beyond all the miracle stories in John, of which there are plenty, beyond all the statements of "I Am" – a shepherd, a gate, water, bread, you name it – is this powerful essence of Christ that always turns to prayer for those things that are beyond us. Not prayer as an easy solution, but rather prayer where we may be opened, like those doors in liminal space.

Christian Wiman is one of my favorite poets. One of his best lines in a poem says "At the end of all that I know, there I find God." Jesus prayed, both for us, and so that we might pray. For all that we face and for all that is bigger than us, for all those moments where all the stories, all the miracles, all the memories, while beautiful and brave, yield in the presence of mysteries and forces beyond us. In Jesus' final moments with his disciples, he could have chosen anything he wanted them to do. And what did he choose in the final, final moment? To pray.

This weekend is a weekend of memory and story, right? It is Memorial Day, a day of memory. Memory and story of those who have served the cause of peace over the years. And if you turn on the television, if you open a newspaper, if you listen to the radio, memory and story for those for whom that is all that is left behind. Memory and story about what little children love to do. Memory and story about teachers clutching them. Memory and story about lives cut too short from violence that, friends, is all too familiar, from too many guns. From violence pouring out in places that are the heart of any community. Places of sustenance and places of learning. Places that don't just satisfy needs, but nourish and feed for tomorrow.

I don't know about you, but this week has been hard. And in the attempt to find out what is to blame – is it the police response, how did events unfold – we all seek to assuage ourselves with solutions that avoid the true root of the problem. And here's what Jesus would offer us on this

day: that the true root of the problem is that we need to be one. One not in power seeking or schemes, but one in love and service. One in connection. Until the pain of the parents in Texas is our pain. Until the pain of the folks in Buffalo is our pain. Until the pain of those who are driven to such extremes is our pain. Until, somehow, we don't figure it out, but we live into the mystery of it all.

In this week's church emailing, I said that what we just need to do is refuse to be consoled. That this week what we need to do is just sit here long enough. And so this week, I'm sorry, but I can't wrap this up for you. I am sorry, but there is no neat way to do this. What you need to do, what I need to do, what we need to do is to refuse to be consoled, no matter who tells us what the solution is.

And what we need to do is what Jesus did. Because on that night, everything had to feel hopeless. Jesus was going to go out and be betrayed into the powers of Rome. Jesus knew what lay in his path. It had to seem downright foolish, if not impossible. And so what did Jesus do? He clung to those he loved, trusted in God, and took a step forward.

It is easy right now to feel hopeless. But if you remember, during the season of Lent, each week we sang "Let us hope when hope seems hopeless, when all our dreams have died." In this moment, what we must not do is lose hope.

Jesus was facing something impossible. And yet, here we are, the last Sunday of Easter, still saying "Alleluia." If I said something, would you remember how to respond? Friends, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Friends, we hold onto that truth, even as we get ready for next week, the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit which makes all things possible.

But before we get to the Spirit, before we lean into what's possible, we need to commit ourselves, not just this Sunday, not just next Sunday, but every Sunday, to do what Jesus did with his disciples when it was at the very end. And that is to simply sit and pray. Not for answers, but for connection to that which is beyond us. Not because we have the solutions, but because we realize we don't.

Pray that we may be one. With each other, with God, and indeed, the whole world.

Amen.