

Sermon Title: Love In the Middle of it all
Text: Revelation 21:1-6; Mark 12:28-34

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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We were just getting ready for bed on Thursday night when we heard that crash and tinkle downstairs that lets you know that the cats had done something that would not be easily undone. Gabrielle gallantly volunteered to check things out, and from her first report—“Uh, oh!”—you knew that it could not be good. I joined her in the dining room where it was apparent that the cat’s leap to the top of the book shelf had been obstructed by the antique plate we’d acquired when my mother had first begun that process of slimming down her life, selling her house and moving to an apartment.

That plate had taken on a pleasant role of memory. It was just the right size for a birthday cake, or tart, and delicate enough to serve for guests. But on Thursday evening it was immediately apparent that its serving days were done. No amount of super glue would restore the thousand shards, and so they’ve been collected in a bag, and the next trip to Door County will include a stop at HandsOn Art, where we imagine some sort of mosaic that will preserve what’s left.

Maybe it’s because I was particularly tired on Thursday night that the best I could muster in response was, “Nothing lasts forever!” Other pabulum would have sufficed, I guess. “No sense crying over spilt milk” comes to mind now, or, “anyone interested in a couple of aging cats?” But my week had been framed by the lettings go which are a part of a pastor’s life—memorial services, and times of remembrance—and of course All Saints’ Day, and our now traditional Time of Remembrance that the day brings in the worship life of our congregation. I’d been reminded in so many ways in the past week that no small part of the Christian life involves the ability to let go. I thought of one of the healing prayers of the Iona Community:

I let go:
Window and door
House and home
Memory and fear.
I let go the hurt of the past
And look to the hope of the future.
I let go
Knowing I will always carry
Part of my past (part of you) with me
Woven into the story of my life.

Help us, Christ our brother
To softly fold inside
The grief and the sadness,
To pack away the pain
And to move on;
Taking each day in your company;
Traveling each step
In your love.

I fed the cat on Friday morning. But with the ebb and flow of the lectionary readings defining the shores of my life this week, I got to thinking that *both* of the texts had, in some way, informed my response to our nighttime surprise—that it wasn't just a trivial accident to be cleaned and swept under the rug. It is in that gentle dance of remembering and forgetting, holding and letting go, believing and forgiving, that so much of our faith is fulfilled. It just didn't seem to make much sense to get worked up about a plate.

The prod came as I thought of the fact that our All Saints Remembrance is most often coupled with the regular practice of gathering around the Lord's Table on the first Sunday of each month. And another memory came to me, of the ornately carved communion table that sat directly in front of the pulpit at Apostle Presbyterian Church in West Allis. Though it was used far less frequently in those days (six times a year, whether you needed it or not) I see so vividly the gothic script gold lettering on the front of that table, that oddly was covered by the bright white tablecloth whenever it was put to its intended use: "Do this in Remembrance of Me."

It was not until seminary that I came to understand that the key word in that sentence—*remembrance*—was actually a double negative. When Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room, and instructed them, *whenever they gathered* to do this "in memory" the word he used was *anamnesis*, a curious construct that could be literally rendered "not not holding in mind." The call to faith is a call to hold in mind that which might otherwise slip into forgetfulness—amnesia—as we make our way through the bustle of life. So much of what passes for religion in this world, Jesus knew, was trying to forget, but he knew better: the tidal movement of believing is not to carry all out to sea, but to bring us back to awareness—to cease our forgetting.

And though the disciples could hardly have known it, Jesus must have been painfully aware that what he was asking them to keep before them was as horrifying a series of events as history contains: "remember my death, until I come in glory." This table opens a space, between the *then* and the *yet to be*, between terror and glory, within which the drama of our salvation is being worked out.

I wonder if one of the reasons this solemn remembrance which has worked its way into our worship each year is so important to us because it leads us to that fine line between our remembering and our forgetting where God's Spirit can both mend and tear our hearts, and help us to call to mind that which we have only heard as promise.

The words from Revelation that bring clearer focus. You see it is the very strange characteristic of Christian remembering that it does not so much call to mind what has been, but it enables us to remember that which is to come. *Left Behind* has sort of high jacked the imagery of John's apocalypse, but at its core this very strange last book of the New Testament was a call to the earliest church to find its greatest hope, not in what had been, but in a vision of life that transcends, and transforms, and fulfills all the challenges and trials life has to offer. When all the seals are broken and the trumpets have sounded—when history has done all it can to make sense of the machinations of the universe, we're left with this vision: a new heaven and a new earth—a New Jerusalem—coming down from heaven from God.

We dare to *dream* as Christians, because at the very core of our faith is a promise that is so certain that it dwells in our *memory*: that the God who calls us, who breathed life into us, and whose arms receive us when our days are done, is not a God far off in the heavens, but One who will dwell with us; who will wipe away every tear from our eyes; a God of such power that death itself, and mourning and crying and pain, become as nothing in his embrace.

The purpose of John's revelation is not to so terrify us that we will somehow earn our way into God's blessing. The purpose of the revelation is to set our future in our midst as clearly and fully as if it were a memory already fulfilled. Because it is when we begin with this end in mind that we can truly live as God intends for us: not as those whose best days are behind them, but as those whose greatest promise is yet to be. We can live in that space in between the *then* and the *yet to be* in which our salvation is worked out.

And it's our Gospel that names the core of that living—what it means to work out that salvation. Why did God open up this space between our memory and our hope? Why did God allow God's own self the horror and indignity of the Cross? Because it opens a place in which God's very essence can be embodied: where we can *love* the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. It is precisely the shattered plates, and the broken promises, and the foreshortened lives, and the hands let go that provides the space within which we can catch the faintest glimpses of that for which we were created: not to consume and die, not to accumulate in order to rust, but to *love*—to love so well that it hurts when it is over. And the Gospel reminds us that there is no one who more than God who understands the pain of that loss whose name is dying—the closing off of the future; the sealing of the tomb—to “love that well which we must leave ere long” is the way the Bard put it. God knows.

But God knows, as well, that the closing of that tomb is not the last word of love. We can see it for ourselves, but only through the tear-filled eyes of those who come to that stone cold tomb hoping for no more than to once more hold the body, touch the flesh. Don't hold me, Jesus said. Go on ahead, and do what I told you to do. Break bread. Share the cup. Live into that sacred space between what was, and what is yet to be. There you will find me. And not only me, but that whole host of witnesses—the heavenly city, Jerusalem, descending from heaven from God. God himself will be with us, our tears wiped away, and death will be no more.

With all the saints, let us come together at this table of remembrance, not to forget, but to *never* forget the mystery of God's love set in our midst between what has been, and what is yet to be.

Amen.