

Memories that Transcend Death

Hebrews 12: 1-2

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,^[m] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[n] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

I am a dog person by marriage. I didn't grow up with pets and Mary Page did. So my first experience having a dog was right after we got married, we got Albus who was the sweetest, most perfect dog you could have. When Mary Page was pregnant with Nina, she was basically sick every day for her entire pregnancy, and Albus would lay beside her all day in bed, sometimes, he would bring some of his dog toys to her to try to make her feel better.

There was never a single moment in his life when he was ever aggressive towards another person or dog. He really was the perfect dog. So you can imagine how devastated we were the day that he got out of the fence and was hit and killed by a car. The grief was raw and harsh. We all wept and wept and wept and the pain was deep for some time.

But, time also is a healer.

Time doesn't do away with grief, but slowly the raw pain turns into memory. We still miss Albus, but we also have come to a place of gratitude for the time we had with him.

About a year after Albus died, we decided we were ready to get a new dog, so we went to the humane society and brought home Jolene. Whereas Albus was calm, Jolene is feisty. Several weeks after we had brought her home, Nina, who was six at the time, was out in our backyard playing with Jolene and Nina came in to get her leash. I asked her what she was doing and she just said she wanted to take Jolene somewhere, so I gave her the leash and then stayed by the window to see what scheme Nina had up her sleeve. She led Jolene to the spot where Albus was buried. And while I don't know what exactly she was saying, I saw her sit down on the ground, point to Albus' grave, and start talking to Jolene.

I later asked Nina what all she told Jolene and, while she didn't want to talk too much about it, she did say, "I told Jolene she needed to learn to be like Albus." Nina had journeyed from unbearable grief to grief accompanied by memory to grief and memory that continues to speak and teach her and, hopefully Jolene.

Today is a special day in the life of, not just our church, but of churches all over the world called All Saints Sunday. For centuries, the day we know as Halloween has been observed by Christians as All Hallows Eve, All Saints Eve, the day Christians have long remembered and celebrated those who have passed before us. It's a time where we remember all those saints who have gone before us, particularly naming those who have died in this year, but also taking

time to remember all those loved ones we've lost at any point in time whose loss we still grieve and whose life continues to speak to us. Like Nina told Jolene – "Albus is someone you'd should emulate," that what our saints are for us. In remembering them, we also remember how their life continues to speak to us, continues to shape our own. Today, we give thanks to God for being able to share this life with them, a time to cry out to God over the loss we still feel, and, a time to remember – to remember who they were and the impact they had and continue to have on our lives.

Remembering is a central act of our faith. Throughout our Scriptures, God invites the people to remember. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember that I delivered you. Remember that I am the God of your ancestors. Remember how I worked in their lives and that I am working and will work in your life.

Memory is a central part of what binds us and holds our community together. Memory tells us how we have been formed and who we are. By remembering those who have come before us, we are also reminded of our responsibility to pass on our love, our wisdom, our collective memory to those who came after us. Memory is like an eternal glue – it connects us with all who have come before and with all who will come after.

You see, the beauty of remembering and naming those we've lost is that we get to hold on to not only the moments of pain but also the moments of deep and abiding love, a love that remains with us even in the midst of and after death.

Today, when our family remembers Albus, rarely do we become fixated on how he died. We remember how he would get so excited to see someone that he wouldn't just wag his tail, but would shake his whole bottom. We remember him coming to check on Nina and him laying beside Mary Page in bed when she was sick. We remember the good times. You see, our love for Albus transcends the pain of his loss and it does so precisely through our memories of him. We remember and are grateful for the love that he brought to our lives.

Memory is at the heart of our Scripture today from Hebrews which invites us to consider and remember the great cloud of witnesses that have come before us. But leading into that Scripture, is a whole litany where the writer of Hebrews names all of the great figures of their faith: Abel and Abraham, Sarah and Moses' mother, Rahab and Samuel, and so many others. The writer is reminding his community of their collective memory – that their faith is not isolated apart from the ways those who have gone before have experienced it...that they are connected not just to each other, but to all those who have gone before them, to all those whose lives continue to speak to them. And so the writer ends this great litany with the words we read earlier:

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,^[m] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

All Saints is the day in the church year where we are invited to remember that great cloud of witnesses – whether they are parents, siblings, or spouses, whether they are children or those taken from us far too soon, whether they are pets or best friends. On this day, we are invited to acknowledge our grief and the loss we feel while also remembering the love and joy they brought to our lives.

So I invite you to bring to mind your great cloud of witnesses, those people who have helped you be the best version of yourself, those people who brought so much love and joy to your life, and yes, even pain as you mourn their loss.