

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 5, July 1, 2012, dedicated to all men and women who have sacrificed their lives for this nation in war and peace for 236 years since we declared our independence on July 4, 1776, to James E. Bobb in thanks for his three years of music ministry and a blessing on his new journey in faith, and always to the glory of God!

“Life After Loss”

II Samuel 1:1,17-27; Mark 5:21-43

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On the battlefield of war, King Saul and his son, Jonathan are killed by the Philistines – the same warriors from whom Goliath came. As II Samuel opens, David leads the people of Israel in a public lament for their slain warrior king. David’s deeply moving and pathos-filled poem lifted to the ears of all who will hear marks a deep and painful moment in the life of Israel. What the future will hold, no one knows. But in this moment of terrible tears, we know that *“the beloved and lovely Saul and Jonathan,”* torn in life by struggles and torment, are united in their death on the battlefield of Ziklag. David wails aloud for his dearest friend, *“Jonathan . . . greatly beloved were you to me. You love for me was wonderful, passing the love of a woman”* (II Samuel 1:26).

As we stand on the edge of July 4th and acknowledge that in our 236 years of independence most of our days have been framed by war and rumors of war, we need to pause and pay attention to

David's public lament and grief. I submit that we have lost our capacity to publicly grieve. We have become so busy with power, so mesmerized with our ideologies of control and so directed to the next battle and the next war that we do not know how to lay down our weapons and weep. This inability to grieve and to name and claim our pain causes barriers to newness. It means that we never allow for the dead to be dead and for the fallen to be laid to rest. We cannot move on if we cannot say with David, *"How the mighty of war have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"*

In this week of national pride swelling, it is past time to cry. So let us claim this time to lament the millions of soldiers who have died on the battlefields and the tens of millions of innocents who died in the path of war. It is time to weep. It is time to cry.

It is time to reawaken the spirit of Abraham Lincoln speaking at the cemetery dedication in Gettysburg - the most blood-stained battlefield of our civil war where over 100,000 slain laid in that Pennsylvania hamlet once covered by clover fields and now a national cemetery that goes on forever.

President Lincoln said on a cold November day:

"We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

There are so many bones that need to be given final rest - so many memories which need to be handed over to God so that God's peaceful hand may lay them in the grave of grief and thus allow a new birth of hope, and, yes, a new birth of freedom.

We find our way through grief in the poet's pens and in the hearts of those who lie down and weep aloud in the face of death. It was only 483 days after President Lincoln consecrated the ground on the hillside of Gettysburg that his blood flowed unto death through the streets of Washington, D.C.

Our own late and great Ohioan, Dr. Washington Gladden, (whose date with death was 94 years ago tomorrow), like David before him, wrote this poem for his fallen warrior/president, Abraham Lincoln.

APRIL THE FOURTEENTH, 1965

*Toll!
Slowly toll, funeral bell!
Let your solemn pulses tell
That the white robes of the angel
Chanting peace are soiled with blood;
That Humanity's evangel
Was a curse misunderstood;
Toll! The staff of strength is broken
That the people leaned upon;
Toll! The grief that hath no token,
For our kingliest man is gone.
Toll! Toll!*

*Weep!
Let the heavens drop tears of woe!
Darkness shroud the land below!
Weep! Ye millions hath he guided;
Weep! All ye who scorned him here;
Let the land so long divided
Meet in sorrow round his bier!
Weep! Ye hosts whose chains are falling;
Palsied lies the arm that broke them;*

*Words of life ye heard him calling,
Silent are the lips that spoke them!
Weep! Weep!*

*Rest!
He is resting in his grave
Where the prairie grasses wave;
Rest! Our fathers' God ordaineth
That this martyr's blood shall be,
Evermore while earth remaineth
Precious seed of Liberty!
Rest! Our God will watch the sowing;
Wait! The harvest ripens fast;
All the golden fruitage growing
Will be gathered in the last,
And reapers soon
be going to their rest.*

It is the poets and the prophets who lead us back to the bones of those we have left in piles of partial grief. Thanks be to God for those who lead us to lament and stand over us as the ghosts of history stand gravely by.

In her poem *Pilgrimage*, our nation's newest (and youngest!) poet laureate, **Natasha Trethewey**, (herself a daughter of the South) visits another battlefield of the Civil War. She speaks of the "ghost of history" as she writes of Vicksburg:

*Pilgrimage
Vicksburg, Mississippi*

*Here, the Mississippi carved
its mud-dark path, a graveyard
for skeletons of sunken riverboats.
Here, the river changed its course,
turning away from the city
as one turns, forgetting, from the past —*

*the abandoned bluffs, land sloping up
above the river's bend — where now
the Yazoo fills the Mississippi's empty bed.
Here, the dead stand up in stone, white
marble, on Confederate Avenue. I stand
on ground once hollowed by a web of caves;
they must have seemed like catacombs,
in 1863, to the woman sitting in her parlor,
candlelit, underground. I can see her
listening to shells explode, writing herself
into history, asking what is to become
of all the living things in this place?
This whole city is a grave. Every spring —
Pilgrimage — the living come to mingle
with the dead, brush against their cold shoulders
in the long hallways, listen all night
to their silence and indifference, relive
their dying on the green battlefield.
At the museum, we marvel at their clothes —
preserved under glass — so much smaller
than our own, as if those who wore them
were only children. We sleep in their beds,
the old mansions hunkered on the bluffs, draped
in flowers — funereal — a blur
of petals against the river's gray.
The brochure in my room calls this
living history. The brass plate on the door reads
Prissy's Room. A window frames*

*the river's crawl toward the Gulf. In my dream,
the ghost of history lies down beside me,
rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.*

*(Pilgrimage from Native Guard: Poems by Natasha Trethewey.
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Let us weep and lament and allow the ghosts of history to rest in peace.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus gives us a vision of life redeemed and remembered in a way that brings hope to life. Meet Jarius and his daughter – who bears no name in this story. Jarius is a leader of the synagogue in his hometown. His 12-year-old daughter lies dying. Everyone else has given up hope. But, he has heard there is a prophet, a teacher, a healer named Jesus who is the embodiment of hope.

He goes to Jesus and begs our Lord to heal his little girl. Jesus agrees to go to her. While on the way, Jesus encounters a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She comes up behind him, touches his robe, power goes out of him to her and she is healed. While this all happening, news comes that Jarius' daughter has died. "Why bother going to her now that she is dead?" the people implore. But Jesus pushes on and with her mother and father by his side, Jesus raises the child from the dead. He orders them to say nothing to anyone.

Along with poets like Washington and Natasha and tearful leaders through the ages like David and Abraham, we are given permission to publicly grieve our fallen and beloved ones. The ghosts of history will lie down beside us, roll over and pin us beneath their heavy arms if we do not weep for them.

By facing our deaths and lamenting our losses, we ultimately find peace. It is faith that goes beyond our fears that lead us to Jesus. He will walk us through the pain. He will linger with us in

our losses. He will, raise us up in a resurrection like his. He will not leave us alone. In him, we will come to know that there is life after loss. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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