

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Vicar Sarah Derrick  
April 7, 2019

How do we mark or memorialize loss?

This week, returning from out of town, I went to pick up my dog, Winston, from the vet, where he was boarding. After the receptionist called to the back, “Winston Derrick is getting picked up from boarding” (which always makes me laugh, when they call him by his first and last name), I waited for him to inevitably barrel out from the door and collide into me. And as I waited, I noticed a candle on the clinic’s check-in table. The candle was lit, and it had a note beside it. “If this candle is burning, someone is saying goodbye to their beloved pet. Please take a moment of silence to remember their life together.”

As I waited for Winston, my eye stayed on that candle. Having just returned from time in SC following my grandad’s death, my heart hurt for whoever was inside saying goodbye.

Whether it is the death of a family member or friend, a beloved pet, or other losses we experience (the end of relationships, the loss of a job)... saying goodbye to someone or something that we have known and loved, felt comfort and safety in, is one of the hardest things we as humans have to do.

And our grief leads us to find ways of making meaning of that which has passed or changed, or that which is soon to pass or soon to change, finding ways of acknowledging loss as individuals and together.

There are groups of singers who will go into hospice patients' rooms to sing their favorite hymns as they draw closer to death.

Family members share stories of their mother, sister, aunt, grandmother.

Or maybe, it is simply a lit candle to let a community know that someone is soon to be experiencing loss, and to invite a pause or a prayer.

Our gospel today has a few pictures of how the nearing death of Jesus is marked.

Jesus comes to Lazarus's house where Martha serves him a meal. Coming from South Carolina this week, where every time we opened the door it seemed like someone was there with a meal and a story about my granddad, I so see this as Martha's way of showing care for Jesus.

Then we have Mary anointing Jesus with expensive perfume, wiping it with her hair, an act of compassion and gratitude for who Jesus has been, and a recognition of where he is heading—toward Jerusalem, toward his death. Both of these actions of feeding and anointing reflect a deep relationship, and they—as best they can—are preparing themselves and their dear friend Jesus for what will soon be a loss, a change of how things have been.

I also want to spend a little time on Judas before I ask you to talk to each other for a minute.

Because these parenthetical sidebars from John in this passage kind of bug me. I don't like Judas being written off. Maybe Judas was greedy and didn't really care about the poor, but maybe there's more to it than that. I wonder if Judas was also trying to make meaning out of what he saw playing out before him. You might know all too well that grief does strange things to people, it can bring out our very best, but it can also bring out our very worst. I wonder if Judas wasn't also, with Mary and Martha, grieving what was clearly becoming an inevitable loss of his dear teacher. I don't think Judas didn't care. I think Judas cared, and I think it was Judas' grief and despair that lead to the story of Judas we know from scripture.

Because I see this week's gospel as being so much about interpersonal relationships, I want to open up a short time for you to talk with a neighbor. (If you're visiting, don't be alarmed and please come back next week... this is not a normal activity for us)

I wonder if you could take a couple minutes to share with one or two other people sitting close by a ritual or way of memorializing that you have found meaning in. Maybe it has been before or after the loss of a loved one, maybe it has been surrounding a big life transition, but as you are comfortable, share a ritual that has meaning for you, and share what about that ritual has made it meaningful.

I wonder if you noticed what about your partners' ritual made it meaningful for them.  
(Ask people to share)

Things that make rituals meaningful:

Honors the life of the person

Brings community together, reminds us we aren't alone  
Assures us of God's presence

As human communities, we are gifted with the ability to make meaning out of our grief. We find ways to mark passages that will affect life as we have known it to be. That's what we have a snapshot of today.

For whatever reason, Lazarus's presence in this passage really stuck out to me this week. Our gospel opens up: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of **Lazarus**, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and **Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.**"

Lazarus was at the table with Jesus. Lazarus, the one who Jesus had raised from the dead sat with Jesus, the one who was moving toward his own death. Lazarus never leaves the table.

In Lent we confront death; we move toward the death of Jesus. But in doing so, in preparing for death, in memorializing death, we never lose sight of Jesus' power over death.

The same God that raised Lazarus, the same God that raised Jesus, is the same God that promises resurrection and restoration for all creation. We proclaim the power of resurrection even in the midst of Lent.

Saying goodbye is hard, grief is so hard. And our gospel today invites us not to disengage from pain, not to step away from grief, but instead to move towards it, to

sit with it, to find ways to mark it with those we love, knowing our grief is in the company and comfort of the resurrected Jesus who sits at the table with us.