

**June 26, 2022**  
**Judges 11**  
**Don't Forget**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

Carved into our communion table are the words, "This Do in Remembrance of Me." These words, taken from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, were part of Paul's instructions for the institution of the Lord's Supper. While each of us coming to the Table may believe something different about what communion means, at the center of the ritual for most of us is remembrance. When we gather at this Table and participate in communion together, we remember the story of Jesus' last meal with his friends. We remember the story says he ate with one who would betray him, one who would deny him, and the rest of them who would scatter in fear when he was arrested. We remember there was a place and enough for everyone at the table. And we tell that story over and over again so we never forget Jesus and his ways of welcome, love, and compassion.

The movie *Coco* is also about remembering. It is set in Mexico around the traditions and practices associated with el Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. The Day of the Dead is a holiday that originated in Mexico, during which families welcome back the souls of their deceased relatives for a brief reunion that includes food, drink, and celebration.

A blend of Mesoamerican ritual, European religion, and Spanish culture, the holiday is celebrated each year on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Families decorate elaborate altars in their homes with pictures of their ancestors, bright yellow marigolds, candles, food, and religious symbols.

I hope you have had the opportunity to see the movie, but in case you haven't, let me try to bring you up to speed. The movie is about the Rivera family. Imelda Rivera was the wife of a musician who left her, and their young daughter Coco, to pursue a career in music. Hurt and bitter because he never returned, she banned music in the family and opened a family shoe-making business to provide for herself and Coco.

Ninety-six years and three generations later, Imelda's great-great-grandson, 12-year-old Miguel is the center of this story. He secretly dreams of becoming a musician like Ernesto de la Cruz, a popular actor and singer of Imelda's generation.

One day, Miguel inadvertently damages the photo of Coco with her parents on the family altar. As he removes it, he discovers that Coco's father (whose face is torn out) was holding Ernesto's famous guitar.

Concluding that Ernesto is his great-great-grandfather, Miguel ignores his grandmother Elena's objections and leaves to enter a talent show in celebration of the Day of the Dead.

He enters Ernesto's mausoleum and steals his guitar to use in the show. This theft causes a curse to be put on him. He becomes invisible to everyone in the village plaza. However, he can see and be seen by his dog Dante and his skeletal dead relatives who are visiting from the Land of the Dead for the holiday.

Because of the curse, Miguel ends up a visitor in the Land of the Dead.

When he arrives, his relatives realize the reason Imelda cannot leave to visit her family: Miguel removed her photo from the altar, and he discovers he is cursed for stealing from the dead. Miguel must return to the Land of the Living before sunrise or he will become one of the dead. To return, he must receive a blessing from a member of his family using an Aztec marigold petal that can undo the curse placed upon him.

Imelda offers Miguel a blessing on the condition that he abandon his musical pursuits when he returns to the Land of the Living; Miguel refuses and attempts to seek a blessing from Ernesto, who he still believes was Imelda's long lost husband, his great, great grandfather.

While looking for Ernesto, Miguel encounters Héctor, a down-on-his-luck skeleton who once played with Ernesto and offers to help Miguel find him. In return, Héctor asks Miguel to take his photo back to the Land of the Living so he can visit his daughter before she forgets him, which will cause him to disappear completely. In the Day of the Dead tradition, someone does not die a final death until there is nobody in the Land of Living who remembers them. The pictures on the altars, the family stories, the Day of the Dead visits from ancestors, all these things keep the memories of family members alive.

We will leave Imelda, Hector, and Miguel where they are for a few minutes. We will not forget about them though.

While most of us do not observe the Day of the Dead in our homes, the idea of using pictures and stories to help us remember our loved ones is familiar to us. You, having listened to my sermons for a while, know about my grandmother's

silver aluminum Christmas tree and her love of telling stories. I tell her stories to remember her, and I find that remembering her is good for my heart. In his book, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, "When you remember me, it means you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart." In short, I think what Buechner is saying is that our lives count for something. While we are here, we affect other people, and when we die, we live on in memories and through the lives of the people we were close to. To be remembered is to matter. It is good to be remembered.

The stories in the Bible come from an oral tradition in which each generation told them to the next so they would be remembered. The stories were never meant to be used in the same ways we would use a section of a history or science book. They were meant to teach us something about our faith ancestors and how they understood the world and their God. The story from the book of Judges we have today is a hard story to read and equally hard one to hear. Because of that, we don't tell it very often, but I think it's important, especially today, to remember it. It is about a man named Jephthah and his daughter. Jephthah's father was Gilead, one of Israel's judges, and his mother, according to the story, was a prostitute. The use of the word prostitute does not necessarily mean Jephthah's mother was a sex worker, it means she was an outsider, and was not married to the father of her child. Gilead was married, though, and he had sons with his wife. When those sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, presumably because they didn't want to share their inheritance with their half-brother.

Jephthah earned a reputation for being a mighty warrior. So, when the Ammonites picked a fight with the Israelites, the elders of Gilead went to Jephthah and asked for his help to defend them. He agreed saying, "If you bring me home again to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head." The elders agreed. Jephthah began by trying to negotiate with the Ammonites. The negotiations failed and there would be war. This is Judges 11:29-40.

<sup>29</sup> Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. <sup>30</sup> And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, <sup>31</sup> then whoever\* comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." <sup>32</sup> So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. <sup>33</sup> He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the Israelites.

<sup>34</sup> Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah, and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. <sup>35</sup> When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." <sup>36</sup> She said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites." <sup>37</sup> And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my companions and I." <sup>38</sup> "Go," he said, and he sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. <sup>39</sup> At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that <sup>40</sup> for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (NRSVUE)

\*NRSVUE chooses "whatever." Having consulted with Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison at Phillips Theological Seminary, I believe "whoever" is a more accurate translation of that word from Hebrew.

In the book of Judges, the dramatic point of tension and resolution in each of the judge stories involves the defeat of the enemy and its leader. Because of that, we would expect that the same would be true of Jephthah's story. We would expect the battle and defeat of the Ammonites would be the climax of this story. Jephthah does defeat the enemy, but that part of the story is told in only two verses. The thing that replaces that as the cause of tension in this story is the vow

that Jephthah makes to the Holy before the battle and that vow's fulfillment afterward.

Our text begins with the spirit of the Lord coming to Jephthah as he headed into battle. Normally, we assume that when the spirit of the Lord upon someone is acknowledged, all is well, right? Yet, for some reason, the spirit of the Lord dwelling with Jephthah didn't generate in him adequate confidence in the outcome. So, he offered a vow to the Holy as if he needed an extra insurance policy. In fact, it almost sounds like a bribe. "Lord, I know you've got this, but let me slip you a \$20, just in case." He vowed that if the Lord would make it so he defeated the enemy, when he returned home from the war, whoever greeted him first would become an offering.

A quick translation note: the Hebrew word translated *whoever* in verse 31, could also be translated *whatever*, and in most translations, it is translated *whatever*. However, based on the context, *whoever* is the better choice. A *whatever* would not be coming out of the house to greet him. Animals were not kept inside, so a *whatever* would not be creating him. I also want to make it clear that human sacrifice was not considered an acceptable sacrifice to the Holy, though there are stories within the biblical tradition that indicate human beings did not get that message. The God of Israel never required a human sacrifice-ever. One of the things this text does is remind us that human beings have been getting things wrong for a long time.

Jephthah's lack of faith in the Holy would cost him. But as is often the case, not only in ancient Israel, but in our world today, the real cost is felt by the one who is most vulnerable, in this case, Jephthah's daughter. Jephthah tore his clothes as a symbol of mourning, but he mourned for himself, not for his daughter, who he identified as the cause of his "great trouble." Yet, it is his daughter who will die unnecessarily and with no children of her own to keep her memory alive. There will be nobody to come after her to tell her story.

Jephthah's daughter, like Hector and Imelda in *Coco*, was in danger of being forgotten. In the movie, Miguel soon discovers that Ernesto is not his great, great grandfather and Ernesto is also a bit of a jerk. You see, he and Hector were song-writing/musician partners back in the day. Hector tired of being away from his family and told Ernesto he was going home. Ernesto needed Hector's songs, so he

poisoned him, and stole his songs. It was Hector who was Miguel's great, great grandfather; his great grandmother, Coco, was Hector's daughter.

It was Hector's face that was missing from the family picture. And Coco was the only one still alive who remembered him. If his picture didn't get back on the family altar before Coco died, his memory would be lost forever, he would die his final death.

At the end of the movie, as the sun rises, Imelda, having found out that her husband, Hector, had been kept from returning home, changes her mind about music and blesses Miguel with no conditions attached so he can return to the Land of the Living. When he arrives home, he plays a song for Coco that her dad, Héctor, wrote for her.

The song sparks her memory of Héctor and revitalizes her, and she gives Miguel the torn-out piece of the photo from the altar, which shows Héctor's face. Elena, his grandmother, reconciles with Miguel, accepting both him and music back into the family.

In the final scene, one year later, Miguel proudly presents the family altar - featuring a photo of the now deceased Coco and the restored photo of Héctor and Imelda - to his new baby sister. In the Land of the Dead, Héctor and Imelda join Coco for a visit to the living family as Miguel sings and plays for his dead and living relatives. The ancestors will never be forgotten; their stories will continue to be told and sung.

And at the very end of Jephthah's daughter's story, we learn that she is not forgotten either, "So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite." This is the only place we find good news in this text. It was not good news that Jephthah was driven from his family because he did not have the same mother as the other sons. Jephthah's lack of faith and inability to trust the Holy were not good news. Certainly, the daughter's unnecessary death was not good news. But it is good news that the women who came after Jephthah's daughter remembered her. It is good news that even today we gather to tell this story because this story isn't about one woman thousands of years ago, it's about all who suffer and/or die unnecessarily at the hands of the ones who hold the power.

It's about the ones who die in childbirth because they don't have access to the healthcare they need. It's about all without bodily autonomy. It's about the ones who become casualties of wars they didn't start and can't escape. It's about the ones who are killed by domestic partners because they are more afraid to leave than they are of staying. It's about the ones who try to leave the danger of their countries of origin and die before they reach sanctuary. It's about the ones who physically protect school children from gun violence in classrooms and so many more. We should keep their pictures in our minds; we should remember them. We should remember their lives and lament their deaths because, like Jephthah's daughter, they are sacrifices. They are sacrifices to unjust systems, sacrifices to the second amendment, to politics, to patriarchy, white supremacy, toxic masculinity, our anxiety of scarcity, and sacrifices to our fear of the other. We must remember them.

We must do more than remember. We must do more than lament. These stories must inspire us to create a world where the ones who are vulnerable are not sacrifices on the altars of the ones with legislative, judicial, economic, and social power. When we come to this Table, we must remember not just a meal, but the life and sacrifice of the man who broke the bread and shared the cup with everyone; the one who believed that the life of one person or the lives of groups of people were not worth less than the lives of others. And we, as his followers, must continue to tell that story and all the stories of courage in the face of fear, justice in the face of oppression, and compassion in the face of apathy because right now, today, we need all the courage, justice, and compassion we can muster.

Amen.