

5/30/21

John 15:14-21

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Good morning!

It is so good to be with you today! The promise I make to you today is that at the very least you will be glad to have Kelley back next week!

Let us listen for the word of God as we hear today's text.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep^[a] my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^[b] to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in^[c] you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Let's set the scene - today's text comes from a section of text considered the farewell discourse. Jesus is attempting to tell the disciples ALL the things they are going to need to know when he is no longer with them. I share this because I imagine these words don't come out lighthearted but are concerning and solemn. In the text Jesus reminds us and the disciples that if we love Jesus we will keep his commandments. I can hear those mean well disciples, but Jesus, which ones are we supposed to be keeping? To the Disciples credit, It is difficult to keep them all straight with the beatitudes, and the head scratching parables, and the miracles. And as it is the farewell discourse I am sure the disciples are more concerned with his language about sending an advocate..because why do they need an advocate when they have Jesus!?

Jesus responds "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." Well Thank you, Jesus – all is crystal clear now. When we get down to it, what Jesus is referring to here are his commands to, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself" and to Love one another just as Jesus has loved us. "Those who love me will my word and God will make a home in them." On this Memorial Day weekend I can't help hear in these words the call to be a living memorial. It takes me back to his other well-known words, "Do this in remembrance of me." And we often recite those words at the table and

tie them into his last night in the upper room with his disciples but what if loving people is another one of those – do this in remembrance of me moments?

Memorial Day all began with a group of women decorating the graves of soldiers during the Civil War. Decoration Day was institutionalized by President Johnson in 1966, and became a recognized Federal holiday by order of Congress in the “National Holiday Act of 1971.” It is a day of remembering the many that have died when diplomacy failed and ushered in the violence of war. It seems to me that for many Americans, Memorial Day is about the opening of pools, the beginning of summer, a weekend at the lake, discounts on this and that, or an excuse for people of faith to bring civic religion into their places of worship.

And while I love a good hot dog and reason to lay by the pool this year has me wondering if it is more than these things? More even than the donning of flags on the gravestone’s of my grandfathers and remembering the sacrifices that their brothers in arms made so that they could come home. If the isolation and awareness of covid has taught me anything it is that life is not guaranteed. We are here for a limited time, our loved ones are here for a limited time, life is precious and more fragile than we once realized. The forced

slow down of our time in isolation helped solidify for me the necessity of the spiritual practice of slowing down and being intentional about the ways in which I am living. So, this memorial weekend has me on the one hand savoring a good BBQ AND on the other hearing the words of Jesus anew, “those who love me will keep my commandments”, those who love me will love as I have loved. Do this in remembrance of me.

A memorial, as defined by Miriam Webster, is designed to preserve the memory of a person or an event.

Memorials help us hear the voices of people that can no longer cry out, that can no longer laugh, or be what God created them to be. These places rise up and out of the ashes of human history as reminders:

the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC

the World War II Memorial

the Hiroshima Peace Memorial

the Vietnam War Memorial

the Berlin Wall Memorial

the Oklahoma City National Memorial

Arlington National Cemetery

the 9/11 Memorial

But memorials can be lesser known too. Some memorials are small crosses with flowers along the side of a road. Stained glass windows don sanctuaries. Some memorials are scrapbooks, photos, a tool or heirloom passed down, a candle lit on a holiday, a tattoo inked in skin so we won't forget, china used on the dinner table, or the even , as has become more popular memorial trees planted with the actual remains of loved ones so that new life will grow from death – which is a resurrection story all on its own.

I have been to some of those holy places I listed and they are heavy with expectation and history. And so I wonder how do we embody that? Even Jesus's words seem like a tall order. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love one another as Jesus loves. Turn the other cheek, be salt and light at all times, in all places, don't ever grow so consumed by this world that you don't hear the sounds of sorrow, grief, pain, injustice, and fear because you have to be aware of its cadence to be able to offer love through it. PAUSE

I mean I know why it's easier to focus on hot dogs by the pool. Hot dogs by the pool doesn't require so much of me. But what I have learned recently is that we are in good company if we find ourselves feeling underqualified for the task of being a living memorial.

A few week's ago I went to Kansas city with a friend and she introduced me to a podcast entitled Presidential. The podcast takes listeners into each president's upbringing, life, and presidency. Lillian Cunningham of the Washington post recounts the times in which each president lived, their upbringing, their losses and gains, their accomplishments and their failures. I was so intrigued that within a matter of days I was at episode 16 which as our 16th president was on Abraham Lincoln. And the episode on Lincoln, the one that I thought wouldn't surprise me, did.

As part of her research Lillian Cunningham ended up at the Library of Congress and asked Michelle Krowl, the library's Lincoln expert to walk her through some of Lincoln's earliest writings so that listeners might get to know him better. In case you didn't know Lincoln was a lover of language and poetry. It is why his speeches have more beauty and cadence than most other presidents. It's why if asked today most of us could quote a line or two of the Gettysburg address or his second inaugural address.

Michelle began by showing Lillian an old arithmetic book of Lincolns. It is a book penned long before he was the president and long before he knew how his life would turn out and on one of the pages on a corner of a page, in the margins, as an afterthought, is one of Lincoln's first poems faded with age and

it reads, “Abraham Lincoln. His hand and pen. He will be good, but God knows when.” It’s a far cry from the Gettysburg address, but I think even this early poem of Lincoln’s points to our nature to undersell ourselves. Or at least puts a “me too” stamp on the humanity in all of us. That we all want to be good. That we all in some way or another want to leave a legacy. That we want to be a living memorial and have a lasting impact on the people we love.

Lincoln was in this group too. Krowl explains in the episode that Lincoln had a huge desire to be remembered by people who came after him. He had suffered so much loss with the death of his mother when he was nine, and his only sister Sarah a few years later and then his first love Ann Rutledge at 22, he became obsessed with the thought – what is remembered about us after we die? And he began to decide that, somehow, he wanted to accomplish something that could leave the world a better place.

There was a moment when, in his 30s, he was in a near suicidal depression. His friends took all knives and razors and scissors from his room. His political career was on a downward slide. He wasn’t certain he should marry Mary Todd. And his best friend came to his side and said, ‘Lincoln, you must rally or you will die.’ And he said: ‘I know that, and I would just as soon die right now, but I have not yet accomplished anything to make any human being

remember that I have lived.' And so, when he finally signed the Emancipation Proclamation as president, he brought that best friend to the White House and he said to him, 'Perhaps in signing this Emancipation Proclamation, my fondest hopes will be realized. I will be remembered. If ever my soul were in an act, it is in this act.'

It brings me solace to remember that a man who had such an impact on the history of the United States had days and weeks where he too felt the weight of leaving a legacy, of doing what is good and right and hard, and even questioned whether he was having an impact at all. He questioned his role in the wide world, he suffered with loss and grief and depression like you and me. He was human. He wasn't the giant mythical Lincoln of legends that we stand in front of at the Lincoln memorial, surrounded by the beauty of his penmanship and poetic vision for our country, but was a living breathing man who claimed that the objective of the civil war was "to lift artificial weights from all shoulders... and to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life." And then set out to try to bring it into existence with grit and grace.

Not all memorials are about remembering. Some memorials are meant to inspire us to the possibilities of our existence, even in the hard times,

recalling what others lived through, honoring the difficulties of loving like Jesus, and calling us to go and do likewise; and do even greater things. When we do this, we are living memorials not of the Empire, then or now, nor of the violence of the cross. We are living memorials of the one who fed a multitude with a couple of fish and some bread; the one who ate at all the tables no matter who sat at them, And the one who commanded that we walk in the ways as love just as he has done.

This work we are called to is hard work. It is hard to keep the commandments of Jesus. It is hard to always think of our neighbor. It is hard to live in the world in such a way that doesn't tune out the suffering and injustice but instead leans into it, listens to it, and then works for justice and hope and love. But if we learn anything from our places of memorial or those in our lives who seem to be themselves living memorials we know that we do not do the work alone. We work side by side one another and we work with God who never leaves us to the work alone. That's what we are told in this scripture. That as we ad-vo-cate we are sent an advocate. The very presence of God living in and through us.

Last week, Kelley invited us in to a new day for the church. A church community that focuses on relationships first, a church community that

is welcoming others to grow, learn, teach, and share alongside one another, and a church community that recognizes that anything is possible. I wonder if that starts with each of us individually. How will we live our lives as a memorial? Will we be the people we say we are week in and week out when we light our candles proclaim that love is more powerful than fear and that love has no walls or barriers? How will we welcome and care for our neighbors? How will we with our time and our talent work to create a church and a world we want to be a part of? How will our life speak the love of God for all? Will they know we are Christians by our love?

May we ponder these questions in our head and our heart this Memorial Day. And may we be encouraged by the promises that God will go with us as we live lives that honor the ways of Jesus.

Amen.