

Loving What Death Can Touch: A Sermon on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:24

Austin Crenshaw Shelley, The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, March 18, 2018; Year B Lent V

Tis a fearful thing  
to love what death can touch.  
A fearful thing,  
to love, to hope, to dream, to be—  
  
to be,  
And oh to lose.  
  
A thing for fools, this,  
And a holy thing,  
a holy thing

to love.  
  
For your life has lived in me,  
your laugh once lifted me,  
your word was gift to me.  
  
To remember this brings painful joy.  
  
'Tis a human thing, love,  
a holy thing, to love  
what death has touched.

Isn't it fascinating that the words of a 12th century Jewish poet, Yehuda Halevi, so easily travel through space and time? Sitting here in this sanctuary half a world away, and nearly 1000 years later, those of us who have experienced the deaths of people we have deeply loved feel the weight and the resonance of this poem in our bones. Whether the death of our loved one happened decades ago, a year ago today, or even just days ago, we know that Halevi is right: when we stand at the grave, we are not done with the ones we can no longer hold with our hands. We do not simply forget and move on. There's a seed of eternity planted in our hearts, such that the lives we have shared continue to shape our own; their laughter echoes in our memories, their words in our minds—and usually, we want to remember, even if our relationship with the one who has died was complicated. We long to hear their name spoken aloud; we cherish the story of that time they did or said that thing only they could do or say—and yet, remembering puts their absence in sharp relief. It highlights the empty chair, the silence on the other end of the familiar phone number. It is bittersweet. As Halevi so beautifully and truthfully expresses it, *to remember this brings painful joy. 'Tis a human thing, love, a holy thing, to love/what death has touched.*

Isn't it fascinating that the words of a first century Palestinian Jewish carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, so easily travel through space and time? Week in and week out in this sanctuary half a world away and 2000 years later, we return to feel the weight and the resonance of his words in our bones. "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." It's the season of Lent, a season that begins with our remembering that we are all human—mortal beings—life forms that will die. Earth to earth. Ashes to ashes. *Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* That is how we begin this season of marking time in the church. For several years now, I have tried to soften the blow: *Remember you are God's beloved dust*, I say if you are among the few who allow me to impose ashes on your forehead, *and to God's beloved dust you shall return.* I say it this way because I love you and because I believe it is true, but I can't decide if I'm really doing you a favor or a disservice. Because during this season, not this week but next, we as Christians will once again act out the story of the abuse, torture, and death of our God. We will tell the tale of his journey to the cross, of Judas's betrayal—and ours. Of Peter's denial—and ours. As Christians, we will and we must grapple not only with the impending reality of our own deaths, but perhaps more importantly with the reality that we worship a God whom death has touched.

In today's narrative in the gospel according to John, the disciples entertain the request of some Greeks—some non-Jews, some outsiders. "We wish to see Jesus," they say to the disciples, and the sentiment is so innocent and so worthy of repeating that I have seen it inscribed on plaques mounted to pulpits for preachers to see every time they climb the steps and presume to speak the word of God. For those of us who preach, it is a good reminder that the folks in your seats come to church hoping to hear, above all else, a word from the Lord—hoping to see not the cleverness of your preacher nor the hard work she has poured into exegetical research, but Jesus. It's a *good* thing to want to see Jesus. But neither the Greeks in today's scripture lesson nor the disciples know what they are asking. They ask to see Jesus, and Jesus responds by saying that to see him, to truly understand what he's about, they will have to pay attention to the fact that he is about to die. Furthermore, Jesus says they *and we* will have to follow if we want to serve him. I don't know about you, but it's not an invitation about which I feel completely at ease. I hear you, Jesus. *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it abideth alone* (says the King James version); *but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

But you see, Lord, this life as a seed, well, it's pretty spectacular. There are willow trees and warm breezes, laughing children and playful pets who seem to see into our souls. There are people I hold dear, ideas that light up the mind, music that enlivens the senses. There are night skies filled with stars, morning cups of coffee, conversations that cut deeper than the ones about the weather and sear themselves into my heart. The seed life is

one worth loving. It's a gift, after all, a gift from you, Lord. Losing it seems impossible. *Tis a fearful thing, Lord, and a holy thing, to love what death can touch.*

I wonder what it is in me that needs to die in order for new life to emerge. What am I holding on to by my fingernails that I really should let go so that God can open my clenched fists to receive a tender egg, a promise of something new? I wonder what it is in you that needs to die so that you can grow into God's greater vision of who you are to become. I wonder what it is in our church, or in our community, or in our world that must die so that we can truly live. Some among your number insist that you have never doubted your faith. I keep hearing this, and my honest response is: Really? When you tell me that, I must admit, I am flabbergasted. I have made this faith my life's work, my vocation, and yet, I doubt all the time. You see, everyone I know who has died is still dead. So if you can make it through Lent and especially through Easter this year without any doubt at all about the fact that what we believe requires us to suspend our rational understanding of the world, then I hope you know something I do not know. Because if you tell me you have never doubted, then I feel sorry for you. The thing that must die in you is certainty so that you can live a life of trust instead. Trust in a God who died—in a God who was raised from the dead—in a God who speaks of seeds and fruit in parables that turn our limited understanding on its head. Because I think it is especially fitting that this year Easter will fall on April Fool's Day. *Tis a fearful thing/to love what death can touch./A fearful thing to love, to hope, to dream, to be—/to be,/And oh, to lose./A thing for fools, this,/And a holy thing,/a holy thing to love.*

Isn't it fascinating that the words of a sixth century BCE Jewish prophet, Jeremiah, so easily travel through time and space? Jesus wasn't the first who had to prepare his disciples to deal with the notion of a God who died just as we must. The passage we read today which outlines God's new covenant, is among the most beautiful of all Hebrew poetry: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more." What a poetic and potent promise! I have told you before that when God speaks of writing on our hearts, we should consider the ancient near eastern methods of writing. When God writes, it isn't in ink that fades or washes away. Not even in sharpie marker. The Hebrew word for *to write* is the same as the Hebrew word for *to cut* because writing during that time would have meant carving, inscribing—if not into stone, then at least into hardened clay tablets. So when God promises to write God's law on our hearts, our inmost being is inscribed with the presence of God, perhaps in the way a seed is encoded with the DNA to grow into a plant that bears much fruit.

But let's step back a second. Let's not get lost in the beauty of this poetry lest we forget the chaos, fear, and immense doubt into which Jeremiah prophesies. Jerusalem has been destroyed, the temple desecrated and ruined, the people marched off into slavery. It makes sense that they feel their God has died—or at the very least, abandoned them. Their God, after all, was the God who had freed their people from slavery in Egypt. No wonder they now questioned *that* God's power or even existence now that they are once again in chains in a foreign land. Into this death and destruction, God speaks through Jeremiah, through the weeping prophet: *I'm inscribing my law in your hearts. It isn't in the temple ruins in Jerusalem. It is engraved into your core. For your life once lived in me./ Your laugh once lifted me./Your word was gift to me./To remember this brings painful joy.*

Here we sit, halfway around the world, more than twenty-six centuries later. And the words of Jeremiah, the words of the prophet who had first been called as a young boy to speak God's word to God's people, resonate in our bones as our society's own young people raise their voices against the idols adults hold more dearly than we hold our children's lives. There's absolutely nothing wrong with teaching our children to extend kindness and mercy to students who are truly the least among them, but when we try to shame our children, to hold our children accountable for their classmates' mental health—when we claim that "Walking UP" is a faithful alternative to "Walking OUT" to protest gun violence, we are surely hanging on with our fingernails to something in us that needs to die so that our children can live. Hear me out. Walking up and walking out are not mutually exclusive, but the former does not free us of our responsibility to confront the death dealing we do in the name of greed. Jeremiah was brutally tortured for his prophecy. The teenagers of Parkland, Florida receive daily death threats and insults. But they are prophets. And they are calling on adults to set aside political divisions in the name of common sense gun legislation. They are calling on us to die to indifference and ignorance, to slavery to that which brings death in its wake so that new life has a chance to grow. I pray to God we will listen to them, that no more parents may stand at the grave of their child brutally killed by a murder that could have been prevented. That not another parent will feel the sting of the words, "Tis a human thing, love./ A holy thing,/To love what death has touched."

In the name of the God who lived and died and lives again, Amen.