



## “The In-between”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

*November 4, 2018*

*John 11:32-44*

We are in-between right now. All-Saints Sunday is that in-between time when we begin to wrap up the ordinary season and look towards the beginning of Advent. We feel as if it's too early for Christmas carols but too late for the relaxing feeling of summer. We are in-between. And on this All-Saints Sunday, we are in-between the texts, as well. If we didn't celebrate All-Saints Day today, then the lectionary would keep us in the Gospel of Mark, where we have been for a while. And the scripture lesson for today would've been the one of Jesus chatting with a scribe and telling him that the greatest commandment of all is to love God and to love others as yourself. But instead, we are using the All-Saints scripture about death and resurrection and the raising of Lazarus.

And it's ok to straddle two Sundays, to celebrate All-Saints Sunday and to ponder the Gospel of Mark's greatest commandment text. Because these two Scriptures have similar themes. They both teach us the meaning of a communal existence and how we are to love and to live in the in-between time of life and death. That is what we feel today. We are in the midst of life and death, of bills and freedom, of grief and glory, of pain and joy. That is why today is so important. We remember those saints in our lives who are now in the balcony of people watching over us while we remain on this stage of existence, missing them, remembering them, and loving them. The in-between is a hard place to be.

And Jesus knew what it felt like to be in the in-between time as he was far away from the sick Lazarus at the beginning of this story. He was days north of Bethany, having left Jerusalem to go back to the place where he was baptized, the River Jordan. It was the place where everything started, the beginning of his ministry. Little did he know that he would need to travel to Bethany, a town right outside of Jerusalem, the same area where everything would soon come to an end. Jesus was traveling in the in-between.

And if we are to understand how we are to act in this in-between time, we must look to Jesus' reaction to the death of Lazarus. Jesus recognized the reality of death. Jesus mourned. Jesus was angered by death. Jesus rejected death. And we are to look towards the Mark Scripture as well where Jesus says we are to love our neighbors. We find from both of these texts today that the way to ward off the stench of death, the captivity of the tomb, even for just a little bit, is to love God and love others in a way that honors our lives right now in the present. And so, holding both of these texts together this week seems right, even necessary, as we live in the in-between.

Author and professor, Karoline Lewis says, “We live in, exist in, this constant state of in-betweenness, don't we? The certainness of death but also how to live the most of life here and now, how to give witness to the promise of the resurrection without it dismissing the reality of

death in our midst here and now. Believing that loving our neighbors is never for the sake of eternal life after death, but always because it is a means by which death itself is overcome here and now.”

As Jesus approached Lazarus’ tomb, we realize that it is an in-between time for him. Jesus became flesh and dwelt with us in the in-between time of having been with God at the creation of the world, to being abandoned by God as he was crucified on a tree. God did not have to walk with us in the in-between time. God did not have to love us enough to accompany us in our pain, in our loneliness, and in our fear. But God did, in Jesus. Jesus, as he came to Lazarus’ tomb was at a moment between life and the death that awaited him on the cross. And even though he would rise again, just as he would resurrect Lazarus, that fact did not negate the pain and suffering and dying that he would have to choose to walk through for us. Jesus lived and died in the in-between.

So, what can we learn from Jesus in the in-between moments of our lives, in the in-between time? One of the things Jesus does in the in-between time is weep. Jesus wept. We probably all know that shortest verse of the Bible and it is right there in our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus revealed that when we are in the in-between times, there will be tears. Jesus gave us permission to feel sad and to cry. Jesus knew that death wasn’t the victor. Jesus knew that God’s kingdom would come on earth. Jesus knew that God would be with him in the in-between. But, regardless of God’s promises and the strong hope in salvation, Jesus still mourned, Jesus still cried. One commentator said, “When John says that Jesus was deeply moved and troubled, his words literally mean that Jesus groaned violently and was shaken to the very depths of his being. Weeping is not a sign of a lack of faith. Mary and Martha and God as a human, wept tears at the pain and struggle and sorrow of the in-between times. It is okay to cry.”

After the death of our son, Edwin, my friend and colleague Pastor James Lamkin showed up on our front porch bearing food and support. As he sat with me on the couch he said, “I am so sorry and I would do anything to fix this, but since I can’t I’m here to cry with you.” James recognized that there are some things beyond our fixing. There is some brokenness we cannot repair no matter how much time, money, or talent we have. All we can do is weep with those who weep. When this is all we can do, it is enough.

We will also be moved to tears when we love our neighbor. God’s people will always be moved to tears just as Jesus was. Whether we find ourselves at a funeral like we recently did for Dorothy, or remembering our loved ones at an All-Saints Day service, or mourning with our Jewish friends and neighbors at a Shabbat service, or witnessing a horrible injustice, or hearing tragic news about natural disasters or violence on other humans, God’s people will always find themselves in tears. There will always be a lot to mourn in our lives. And even Jesus, who knew that he had the power to raise Lazarus, who knew that he could wait beyond the ceremonial three days when a body’s soul would finally leave the body, who knew that Lazarus would be awoken from his deathly slumber, even Jesus still wept. And so will we, in the in-between.

A few years ago, Bea was running down the hall at preschool holding a salt dough Christmas ornament she’d made. As she ran to give it to Amanda, she dropped it and it broke into a hundred pieces. Of course, Bea began to cry. Everybody was trying to comfort her, but if you

know Bea you know she was inconsolable. Finally, Amanda was able to get her attention and said, “Let’s pick up all of the pieces and put it together and see what we can make out of it.” That is what God is like! God is like a good mother. God understands when and how it hurts. When our lives are shattered, God helps us pick up the pieces, and make something out of what is left. God cares about us when we are broken and when we weep.

We must also realize that in the in-between times, there are not only tears, but there is also work to do. God’s people are a beloved community and we must work together in the in-between moments of life. That is why I think it is important that we remember the story from the Gospel of Mark which talks about loving God and loving our neighbors. Jesus could have raised Lazarus while many miles away at the River Jordan. Jesus could’ve raised Lazarus with a word. Jesus could’ve gone to Lazarus when he was still sick and touched his hand and raised him up. Jesus could’ve brought resurrection to Lazarus all by himself. Instead, Jesus chose to commission others, the community, Lazarus’s family, friends, and neighbors to roll the stone away. Jesus told the community to remove all of the barriers separating them from Lazarus. And Jesus chose to resurrect Lazarus with his grave clothes on so he could ask others to help take off the cloths that were binding him. In order to live fully and honestly and redemptively in the in-between, there is work to be done as a community.

And that’s why when we are in the in-between, we can be assured we are not alone. God is with us. God could have chosen to do everything without us. But God isn’t like that. God is a God of community, and acceptance, and of loving our neighbors. God chooses to cooperate with humanity in order to accomplish God’s purposes. And that is what we saw in the life of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples to follow him. Jesus told his disciples to love as he loved. Jesus told his disciples to serve as he served. Jesus told his disciples to lay down their lives for others just as he did for them. And God invites us to make a home in the in-between just as Jesus did and to join in the work of redemption. God calls us to be a part of the community, to be a church that helps roll stones away and remove grave clothes from people in the world who are entombed in sadness, in fear, in pain, and in isolation. Sure, we aren’t Jesus and we can’t actually raise people to new life. But God lets us help each other in community and that is, according to Jesus, the greatest thing we could ever do. The greatest commandment of all is to love others. So, church, in this in-between time there is work to do.

In a time when “hate thy neighbor” is more prevalent than “love thy neighbor,” we are reminded there is work to do in the in-between. Today, in this world that witnessed the brutal killing of worshipping Jews at Tree of Life Synagogue, the heightened fear of a caravan of migrants seeking shelter and protection, the killing of two black individuals in Kentucky, the ashes of Matthew Shepard interred at the National Cathedral, loving the neighbor as yourself is the means by which we break people out of the tombs of deaths. Loving our neighbors helps us see the saints in us all. On this All-Saints Sunday, this day of in-between time, we are beckoned to see all people as saints. We have work to do in the in-between!

In the in-between time there are tears. In the in-between time there is work to do. And in the in-between time there is hope. There is hope. And I don’t know about you but I need something hopeful. I need to see kindness, and witness mercy, and hear about goodness. For when that happens, I begin to know hope. This week a kind word was said. This week a friend listened

patiently to another friend. This week Jews, Muslims, and Christians worshipped together on Shabbat to share space and the share peace. This week we looked for moments of resurrection and joy and beauty and goodness to get a foretaste of life after the in-between time.

Because we hope for what was promised in Revelation 21. “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” God is telling us to come forth from the in-between time, where God will be with us face to face; and God will wipe away our tears and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Everything will be made new and we will have a place with God and there will be light and there will not be any need or want because we will be redeemed. We must have hope!

And that is why this story of Jesus with Lazarus is important for All-Saints Day, because God walks with us in the in-between time. God is with us in the weeping and the working and the hoping. And if we keep going and hang in there, there will be a time when our tears will be wiped away, our work will be done, and our hopes will be realized. Resurrection is coming. Something might feel sad, but there is happiness in the end. Something might feel like death, but there is life in the end. Something might feel like the grave, but there is a garden in the end. Something might feel like grief, but there is glory in the end. Something might feel like captivity but there is unbinding in the end. Something might feel as if you are shut up in the tomb, but there is a savior shouting to us in the in-between, proclaiming “Come Out! And be free.”

Amen.