

Sermon, October 31, 2021

Psalms 147:1-11

“Quoth the Raven, Nevermore”

I begin this morning with excerpts from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore -
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door -
“‘Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door -
Only this and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December.
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow - sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore.

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he.
But with mien of Lord or lady, perched above my chamber door -
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door -
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil! , - prophet still, if bird or devil! -
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore -
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting -
Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken! quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting
On the palid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door.
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’r him streaming throws his shadow on the floor.
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted - nevermore!

This poem certainly has a gloomy and eerie atmosphere about it, which is why it is so often associated with Halloween. But a close and careful reading shows that it is, in fact, a very sad poem recited by a sad and lonely man.

Poe tells us early on in the second stanza what the poem is all about. He had been rummaging through his books looking for “surcease of sorrow” - a sorrow brought on by the loss of his love, Lenore. The theme runs throughout the poem. At one point he asks if there is a balm in Gilead, and towards the end he begs the Raven to take his beak from out of his heart.

If you look to a printed version of the poem, you will see that the R in Raven is capitalized. This tells us that the Raven is to be understood as a symbol. A symbol of what? A symbol of a never-ending sense of grief and loneliness. It's what Poe, himself, called “a mournful never-ending remembrance”. Her memory haunts him day and night. He yearns to be with Lenore again, but the Raven repeatedly tells him, “Nevermore”. If he can't be with Lenore, then he wants the pain to go away. But, again, it “shall be lifted - nevermore”.

Kierkegaard once pointed out that when we lose a loved one what we are truly mourning is the image of ourselves without the other. Someone who is deeply loved, in a sense, becomes a part of ourselves, and the loss of them can leave a gaping wound in our soul, an empty space that we yearn to be filled.

I mentioned a few months ago in the newsletter that I had found out that a woman that I had once been very much in love with had taken her own life. And even though this had been some time ago, I admit that the news of her death has haunted me all these months. Again, a “mournful never-ending remembrance”. And I'm sure we have all known such grief - perhaps a grief we can never get over - but with the help of God a grief we can get through.

Part of moving through it requires facing the grief head on. Very often when I have met with family members of someone who has died, they will say that the funeral should really be a celebration of his or her life - and certainly that should be a part of it. But it is also important that we not stifle the need to mourn. Coming to terms with the grief is a necessary part of the healing process.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, author of '*On Death and Dying*', writes, “Not knowing how to handle the pain of grief, we avoid it, not realizing it is the pain of the loss we are trying to avoid. A pain that will strike, no matter how much we try to avoid it. Yet by avoiding grief we turn our backs to the help that grief offers, thus prolonging the pain”.

Kenneth Silverman, in his biography of Edgar Allan Poe, refers to the dramatic situation in the poem as a conflict between Remembrance and Forgetting. But I don't think forgetting is what we really want. We don't ever want to forget our loved one, but we do want to put the remembrance in a more healing context. The man in the poem wants to find a balm in Gilead, he wants the Raven to take the beak out of his heart. In other words, he wants the pain to go away, but I really don't think he wants to forget Lenore altogether.

Kubler-Ross, again writes, “We are not suggesting that when you lose your loved one, you can skip the terrible pain of loss and separation, but we believe with all our hearts that even in death, our loved one still exists”. And I really believe this to be true. They exist in our memory, but I think it goes deeper than that. As I said earlier those who we have loved dearly become a part of us. I know, for example that there have been times when I have looked into a mirror and

for a brief flash, I see my father looking back at me. And I think that the part of them that lives on in us represents the best of who they were.

My father and I were rather different people. We did not see eye to eye on a lot of things and had our share of conflicts in my youth. But those things don't seem to matter anymore. They tend to give way to the good memories, and I know my life was enriched by his presence in it. The good memories become a part of the healing.

One of the things that can compound our sense of grief is the thought that there were things undone or unsaid. But it is not unusual to see someone in a cemetery talking to a headstone. That may be nothing more than a symbolic gesture, but, considering our thoughts on an afterlife, who's to say our loved ones cannot hear us beyond the grave? The woman I mentioned before, the night after I learned of her death she showed up in a dream, perhaps an indication that the things left unsaid were not all that important as previously thought or were already understood.

Of course, as people of faith we bring God unto the picture, and as we heard in Psalm 147, "He heals the broken hearted, and binds up their wounds". We are reminded that we are never alone in our sorrow, that the Spirit of the Lord knows our pain and holds out for us healing and the strength to bear our sadness. In a sense, God is the conduit through which we remain connected to those that have gone on before us. In God the time bound, and the eternal come together.

The grieving of loved ones is something we all share in common, and in Christ we have each other to help bear our sorrow. But we have to know that there is more than one way to grieve, and no time limit on how long we do so. But it is essential that we see that grief as a pathway to healing. To any grief that seems self-destructive we must say, "Nevermore". Amen.

Remembrance and Prayer

Speaking of grief, it has been another sorrowful year for our congregation as we have felt the passing of numerous much-loved members. Each were people who were very much committed to the life of this church and served in many ways. We are grateful for such service, but we are also grateful simply for the kind and loving people that they were. Each, in terms of personality, were different from the others, but were united as one in their love, commitment, and their faith in the Lord. With our loss of them we may feel haunted by the sense of "Nevermore", but that is not really true. For as long as we hold them in our memories - and beyond- their spirits will remain a part of this place - and we are all the more blessed for it. And, so, on this All-Saints Day Eve, let us hold them up in prayer...

Gracious Lord, giver of life, comforter in death, and healer of broken hearts and wounded souls, on this day we remember those saints of your church who have passed on into your eternity. We thank you that these people graced our lives with their presence. We thank you for their service to this church and community, and for the ways they touched our individual lives. Although they will be greatly missed, we are happy that for them all pain and sorrow are gone, and that you have welcomed them into your heavenly realm...

This morning we remember...

Jimmy Lampe
Marieda "Mert" Stephenson
David Putnam
Betty Lindemuth
Dorothy Wells
Arnold Hank Slauson

We entrust them now to your loving care and request your comforting and healing presence for those who mourn their loss. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

The Lord be with you! Let us pray...

Gracious God, Eternal Lord, we thank you for this day, and for this opportunity to come together in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. We seek your blessing upon our congregation and place our future in your hands. Although we are small, we are ready and willing to serve, and seek your guidance and inspiration. Give to us a vision of what we are to do and be.

On this All-Saints Day Eve, we have lifted up to you those whom we have lost this past year, but we also remember all of those saints of the past who have served this congregation, as well as those down through the centuries who have served your church worldwide by bearing witness to your love by extending that love to others, especially those who are in need and those who suffer.

As we pray for your church universal, we ask that your help us find greater unity among all Christians, and a greater peace with persons of other religions.

We also remember that today is Halloween, and we pray that your protective hand be on all the children who will be out today for Tricks or Treats - that the day may be a blessing for them. As always, Lord, we lift up to you those who are in need, whether those needs be physical, mental, or spiritual.

Amen.