

# Remembering

Pastor Cynthia Lapp  
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John 14:15-21  
I Peter 3:13-22

On this Memorial Day weekend, the customs of this country call us to remember those who have died. The herb rosemary has traditionally been associated with remembrance. Ophelia says in Hamlet: *There's rosemary; that's for remembrance. Pray, love, remember.*

Shakespeare didn't start the tradition. Greek scholars wore wreathes of rosemary in their hair to help them study at exam time. Apparently they were on to something all those years ago. Scientists have verified that rosemary contains carnosic acid, which can aid memory. If you really want to stave off memory loss, you can go one better than the Greeks and not just wear rosemary, but eat it and use it in cooking.<sup>1</sup>

Today I invite us to breathe in the aroma of rosemary and remember. (If you want to eat the rosemary please come help yourself afterward. I have lots on my shrub at home.) There are plenty of people and things to remember. I share with you a few of the things I remember when prompted by these passages from I Peter and John.

I Peter is not a book of the Bible I have spent much time with, but this particular passage seems awfully familiar. Do good, take one for the team, suffer if you have to, remember your baptism. When the passage talks about doing good even if you are treated badly — I confess that I remember the past 10 years that I have struggled with

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://alzheimers.about.com/b/2008/06/17/rosemary-contains-brain-healthy-ingredient.htm> and <http://www.medicinal-herbs-and-spices.com/benefits-rosemary.html>)

various people from Allegheny Mennonite Conference. I could probably remember other ways that I have been treated badly or treated others with less than good intentions. But just as Hyattsville has become the scapegoat for conference, I confess the conference has become a scapegoat for me.

This word from I Peter rings in my ears. Eugene Peterson in **The Message** says it this way — *If with heart and soul you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you're still better off... It's better to suffer for doing good, if that's what God wants, than to be punished for doing bad.*

Suffer? Is this really what God wants? That we suffer?

The text is not encouraging us to choose suffering for its own sake. It is describing what can happen when we do the right thing. Sometimes even though we do what we understand to be the right thing we may suffer, or at least others may perceive that we are suffering.

I am surprised by the number of people, from outside the congregation, who note the suffering of this church and me as the pastor. The perception is often, that because of the discipline imposed by the conference, we must be suffering. In reality, most of the time our congregational life has continued on with joy, as we worship and work together, as we welcome new people to walk with us, as we reach out to the community.

I am not eager to embrace the role as suffering victim. Neither do I want to discredit or minimize the suffering that has taken place over the past years, by people in this congregation and beyond. Certainly there have been some pretty miserable times. But we have suffered for doing what we thought was right.

When people note our suffering with concern, I wonder if it is not a projection of their own discomfort. It is a different kind of suffering, a lonely suffering because they suffer not with a community as we do, for doing what we think is right. They suffer alone, too scared to do what they know is right. They suffer from guilt, alone with their fear. While we don't choose suffering for its own sake, I Peter reminds us that it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing bad (or avoiding right actions).

**The Message** continues — *Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick.*

Over the years it has not always been easy to respond to the conference with kindness, with attention to Jesus and his example instead of focusing on the negative. But this week I received a letter that helps me embrace the long view and confirms that following Peter's admonition to keep our attention focused on God and speak kindly to those who do not understand us, is the way to demonstrate our faith.

Our persistent loving actions and presence have spoken, at least to some people in the conference. In the future I will have periodic conversations with the commission to keep communication open and to continue understanding each other better. This is a model of respectful and open dialogue that we are called to in the church. I have struggled as much as the rest of us to remember the words of I Peter — to respond gently and respectfully. This seems to me to be the work of the Holy Spirit, who helps, consoles and walks with us just as John writes in chapter 14.

The passage from John reminds us that we are not alone. Though we never met Jesus in the flesh (and the community that was writing the book of John probably didn't either), we have the impression that we are not alone, that somehow Jesus is with us.

Still, it is not always easy to experience the presence of Jesus, the presence of the Spirit. Loneliness is part of being human, in fact part of being a mammal. Dogs and cats, gorillas and monkeys, and apparently even reptiles get lonely. John's word won't help the dogs, cats and geckos left at home alone all day, but John does ask us to remember that loneliness does not have to be a permanent state.

It is an interesting cycle that Jesus proposes in John. If we love Jesus, we follow the commandments. If we follow the commandments, we experience a connection with others. That in turn reminds us that we are not alone but following God with others. We see God in Jesus, we see Jesus in each other, and we begin to catch a glimpse of that Great Love that unites us all.

Again this answer is easier said than done. (Have you seen the church sign on Adelphi Road? "You have questions, we have answers." Adapted for our congregation it would probably read, "If you have easy answers, we will help you ask the hard questions.")

Loneliness, as well as suffering, can eat away at us until we feel as if we are nothing. There is no easy fix for losing a loved one or feeling disconnected from others. Jesus understands this, and so he says he will send another *paraclete*. *Paraclete* is the Greek word for advocate, or helper, or the one who is alongside another to comfort or counsel. Because of the various meanings, the word often remains in the Greek, even

in English translations. This richness leads to a variety of understandings of the meaning of *paraclete*.

Christians interpret the *paraclete* as the Holy Spirit. The inclusive language translation we heard this morning refers to the Spirit as “she,” as the Greek word for Spirit is feminine.

Islam, on the other hand, understands *paraclete* as male and a person that comes after Jesus. I don’t pretend to fully understand the Islamic interpretation of this passage, but it seems that, to Muslims, since the Holy Spirit was already present at Jesus’ baptism the Spirit cannot rightly be understood as “another *paraclete*.” Islam, which affirms Jesus as a prophet, sees Muhammad as the *paraklete* that Jesus is sending.<sup>2</sup>

So whether we are comforted, counseled and helped by a feminine spirit, or by other followers or by Muhammad, Jesus promises that another will be sent, that we will not be alone. As we prepare for Pentecost in two weeks, when we celebrate the presence of the Spirit, we look around and remember how the Spirit is manifest in our life together.

We might be tempted to get caught up in the theological details, in definitions and Biblical interpretations. But we are called back to love, to being a community that works together, worships together, and stands beside each other, even and especially when we feel alone. We are followers of Jesus that attempt to together to live out the commandment to love and in that way bring the presence of the Spirit to this community and the world each day.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mostmerciful.com/paraclete.htm>

As we remember this weekend those who have died, I want to share with you a project with which I have become associated. For the past several months, I have been working with an interfaith group of clergy and lay people called Heeding God's Call in Greater Washington. We are actively calling others to work with us to reduce illegal gun trafficking in the area and thereby reducing the number of deaths due to gun violence. Though Jews, Muslims and Christians may not agree on whom or what the *paraclete* is, we do agree that there is too much gun violence and too many people are dying in the streets and even in their homes.

I first became acquainted with Heeding God's Call in Philadelphia in 2009. I was in Philly for a peace conference with Quakers, Church of the Brethren and Mennonites. The local "Heeding God's Call" group held weekly vigils, sometimes daily vigils, outside the Colossimo Gun Shop for over a year. Mr. Colossimo was eventually forced to close the store as the vigils drew more and more attention to the criminal actions of the gun buyers and the role the store played.

I would not be honest if I said this project has only been easy and inspirational. It is hard enough to rally Mennonites around a project much less an interfaith group that is crossing all kinds of religious, cultural, educational, economic and racial lines. But I try to remember why we are doing this — to save lives — and it is a way for me to seek the peace of this city.

Our work begins in earnest next Sunday as we join together for an interfaith worship service to remember those who have died and call each other to action to stop the violence. While there are many avenues toward peace, we have chosen — as they did in Philadelphia — to focus our attention on a particular gun shop, this one in District

Heights (in Prince George's County). Realco Guns is known for its record of selling more guns that end up in crimes than any other gun store in the Washington area. We will hold a vigil outside the store every Monday from 5-6 p.m. until the owner signs a 10 point code of conduct for selling guns or until the shop closes. As the vigils continue, I hope some of you will feel called to join in this work for peace.

Remembering is not easy — remembering those who die, remembering to do the right thing, remembering to follow the commandments, remembering to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves.

But remember, we are not alone, we have each other and the mysterious Spirit to advocate, guide and comfort us. Thanks be to God.