

“What We Leave Behind”

Genesis 50:15-26

November 1, 2020

Marilynne Robinson’s Pulitzer-winning novel *Gilead* is written as a letter from Reverend John Ames, a Congregationalist pastor in the small town of Gilead, Iowa to his seven-year-old son. Reverend Ames has learned that he is dying of a heart condition and knows that his son will have few memories of him. So, he writes an account of his life to leave behind for his only child. Early in the letter, he explains why: “I’m writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you’ve done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you.”

Through this powerful letter, Robinson confronts her readers with a universal human question—what do we leave behind? The Psalmist writes, “our years come to an end like a sigh...they are soon gone and we fly away.” When our brief chapter of earthly life is over, what remains? What endures? The question is no less compelling for the young than it is for the elderly because all of us are making choices each day that build the legacy we will one day leave. We can make the most of the time no matter how much of it we have left.

November 1st is All Saints’ Day, a holy day that commemorates and honors all those whose earthly life has ended and who have joined the Church triumphant. It is a day for giving thanks, expressing our gratitude for the witness and work of those whose faith has shaped and deepened our own. And, it is a day for considering how *our* lives will be remembered, what we will leave behind one day when our years come to an end with a sigh.

This morning’s scripture from Genesis describes the events that make up the end of Joseph’s life. We picked up the story just after the death and burial of Jacob, the patriarch of the family and father of the twelve tribes of Israel. You might remember that Jacob’s preference for Joseph led to the jealous and angry actions of the other sons, who eventually sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Through a series of dramatic twists and turns, Joseph ends up as viceroy of all Egypt. His brothers and father end up there as well, refugees from the severe drought in their homeland of Canaan. When Jacob dies, Joseph carries his body back to Canaan for burial, then returns to Egypt with his brothers who are nervously awaiting his next action.

Their fear and anxiety are well-founded. The brother whom they mistreated and abused now holds power over their future and their very lives. Anyone who has read the story of Joseph up to this point would not be surprised if he had the brothers imprisoned or sent packing. But something has changed in Joseph that his brothers do *not* expect. You can hear it in the dialogue between them. The brothers rush to Joseph, begging him to forgive them, to remember their father, and act with compassion for his sake. When he hears them, Joseph, the mistreated brother and prince of Egypt, begins to weep. It is one of the most poignant moments in all of scripture. He offers unconditional forgiveness, promising to care for his brothers and their families in the land of Egypt. In a wonderful example of scriptural understatement as the author of Genesis writes, “in this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.”

Why did Joseph do it? What changed him? I believe it was the process of grief over the loss of his

father. Together, the family has been on a pilgrimage from Egypt to Canaan, mourning their father for seventy days. Joseph emerges from that journey a transformed man with a different vision of what matters most. In remembering his father, he begins to consider what kind of legacy *he* will leave behind. Yes, he has achieved more than he ever could have imagined, rising to the heights of power in the Egyptian empire. He has acquired great wealth and noble status, and his life would be deemed a tremendous success by any earthly measure. But the loss of his father reframes Joseph's perspective. Stepping back, he sees the providence of God at work in his story: "Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good..."

This moment of reconciliation and forgiveness between brothers begins the final chapter of Joseph's story, focused entirely on what he will leave behind. The narrator tells us that Joseph lives to see his great-grandchildren, surely his truest success and most treasured legacy. When it is time for his story to end, Joseph is surrounded by his brothers. He passes on the promise that God will lead them out of Egypt and asks them to carry his bones to the promised land... the home of his ancestors and final resting place of his beloved father. And so, Joseph's wild and winding journey leads him back to what matters most. He dies surrounded by his family.

What a story. Joseph's life is a testament to what we leave behind, to what matters the most. Before his life ends, he is able to offer and receive forgiveness, and to see a future of hope laid out before him. Could any of us ask for more than that?

When I was a senior in college, I served as a chaplain intern at Duke University Hospital. My only responsibility was to shadow the chaplain during the late-night hours each Thursday. One Thursday, I arrived to find the chaplain standing in the office doorway, coat on and bag in her hand—a family emergency, she would be back as soon as she could. In the meantime, here's the pager. You'll know what to do. Thirty quiet minutes later, I received a call. A

patient had just died and the family was asking for a chaplain. I remember the feeling of inadequacy that overwhelmed me. What would I say to these family members who had just lost a father, a husband, a grandfather? I arrived outside the intensive care unit and found six family members gathered. After introducing myself, I froze. What to say next? The man standing next to me broke the silence, "he was a good man and a great father. He worked so hard but always had time for us." Another family member chimed in with a story about a family vacation: "Do you remember when?" And the stories kept coming. As I listened, I noticed a common theme. The memories they shared were all about time, all about connection, all about love expressed and felt. Two hours later, the family politely thanked me for coming. As I walked out of the waiting room, I promised myself that I would never forget that experience.

What we leave behind, and what matters most has little to do with our success or material positions, and everything to do with our relationships and experiences. I witness it all the time in my ministry at Second, the incredible gifts of time, relationships, and faith. This morning, the names, faces, and stories of so many saints flood my mind. I hear their names, and I give thanks. I remember the hands and hearts of faithful souls who built the foundation of this church, and I give thanks. I remember the sacred moments gathered with families telling stories and sharing laughter and tears, and I give thanks. Oh, what a legacy they have left behind. Oh, what a gift we have been given in this place, and in our lives.

When my grandfather died in March of 2008, our family gathered in the house that had been my grandparents' home for fifty years. We sat and shared stories and ate olive loaf and farmer's cheese sandwiches lovingly prepared by members of Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church. Poppa's chair was empty and I walked over and sat down in it, maybe for the first time. Beside the chair where he sat for decades, and for his last week of life, there was a small table. On the table were two books: his large-print Bible and a small devotional. At that moment, I knew

exactly what made my grandfather the faithful, loving, compassionate, and kind man he was. I remember him on this All Saints' Day, and I give thanks.

As we honor and remember the saints who now rest from their labors in everlasting peace, let us also commit ourselves to what matters most. What do *we* want to leave behind? It's a poignant question on this Sunday before this Tuesday. Though its origin is a source of debate, I first read this proverb in the work of the poet Wendell Berry—"We do not inherit the earth from our parents; we have borrowed it from our children." For all of us, of any age, this is a truth we do well to remember. What legacy will we pass down, what kind of world will we return to those who will follow us? It's the kind of question people of faith ought to ask.

I remember hearing the great preacher Fred Craddock, then in his mid-eighties proclaim that of all the great heroes of history, the person he most admires is... the cathedral builder. Many of the great European cathedrals took over a century to build, and Craddock imagines the mason cutting the rock for the cornerstone of a massive building that he will never see completed in his lifetime. What these wise people knew, Craddock continues, is that their great-grandchildren would worship in the cathedral that they began. Theirs was a faith that looked forward, to the generations that will follow. May ours do likewise.

I can tell you this: I have never spoken to a person at the end of life who wishes they had been more successful, acquired more stuff, or spent more time at work. I have never prayed with someone in their final moments who regrets the time invested in relationships or the commitment made to Christ and the church. What I hear most often from the dying is love for those who are left behind, wonder at the stunning beauty of this world, gratitude for this one precious life, and hope for life abundant. In the words of *Gilead's* Reverend Ames, "There is so much to be grateful for, words are poor things." Amen.

ⁱ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, 2004.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*