

**Letting Go...  
To the Light...**

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**Readings**

“All Souls” by May Sarton

Did someone say that there would be an end,  
An end, Oh, an end to love and mourning?  
Such voices speak when sleep and waking blend,  
The cold bleak voices of the early morning  
When all the birds are dumb in dark November –  
Remember and forget, forget, remember.

After the false night, warm true voices, wake!  
Voice of the dead that touches the cold living,  
Through the pale sunlight once more gravely speak.  
Tell me again, while the last leaves are falling:  
“Dear child, what has been once so interwoven  
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.”

Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,  
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,  
Are wound and bound together and enflowing.  
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited –  
Only the strands grow richer with each loss  
And memory makes kings and queens of us.

Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.  
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,  
We who find shelter in the warmth within,  
Listen and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven,  
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend  
Our complex love, our mourning without end.

“To Those I Love” by Isla Paschal Richardson

If I should ever leave you whom I love  
To go along the Silent Way... grieve not.  
Nor speak of me with tears, but laugh and talk  
Of me as if I were beside you there.  
(I'd come...I'd come, could I but find a way!  
But would not tears and grief be barriers?)  
And when you hear a song or see a bird  
I loved, please do not let the thought of me  
be sad... For I am loving you just as  
I always have...  
You were so good to me!  
There are so many things I wanted still  
To do...so many things to say to you...  
Remember that I did not fear...It was  
Just leaving you that was so hard to face.  
We cannot see Beyond...But this I know:  
I loved you so... 'twas heaven here with you!

**Sermon**

As you know, one of our own Old Ship members died just over a week ago. And once again I experienced, as perhaps some of you did, what I experience every time someone I know dies. It is an experience to which I cannot put words. It is an experience of the profound mystery of death, the mystery that someone who was alive... suddenly is not alive. And it is indeed always a sudden experience, even if someone has been ill and in physical decline for a long time. For the moment of death is precisely that, a sudden moment, a precise dividing line between life and death.

Words do this experience no justice whatsoever.

As it happened, I had run into our dear member just four days before she had a fall and within a day was gone. She looked good when I saw her that Tuesday. We had a lovely chat. She was alive. She was vibrantly alive.

Then, to hear less than a week later that she was gone was simply unfathomable. This, even though people die all the time! It's not as if people dying is somehow a surprise. The only question is when and how.

But though no surprise, this dying, this one moment alive, next moment dead, one moment with us in every way – physically, emotionally, spiritually – next moment only

in memory... this dying remains a kind of mystery, a shock, so hard to come to terms with. This is so even if we haven't seen a person recently or maybe even for years.

I recall when a college professor of mine, a man who had been a real intellectual and even spiritual mentor to me, died. I hadn't seen him for a very long time. But suddenly – yes, suddenly – I was living in a world without Paul Desjardin's living and breathing presence somewhere.

And of course when it is someone to whom we are very close – parent, sibling, child, friend – the shock and mystery, the seemingly impossible challenge of fathoming the loss is even more profound.

So there are things that we do. The sorts of things we humans have in one way or another always done. We tell stories to begin with. We also sometimes struggle with not so positive feelings: regrets, anger...

And we hold on to keepsakes, special objects that belonged to the dear one or that we associate with her or him. In our modern era we share photographs – sometimes these days lots and lots of photographs!

For example, whereas my parents passed along a relative handful of photographs of their parents, my brothers and I recently sifted and sorted through hundreds of photos of our parents. What to keep? What to discard? Well, as it turned out, mostly keep, for better or worse. Not only that, we took a big box of prints and slides to Nobles Camera – who did a fine job of putting them all on DVDs.

What is this all about?

Are we just holding on when we should be trying to let go?

Many of you know the last lines of one of Mary Olivers's most loved poems:

To live in this world

you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

Well, anyone whose lived for any length of time knows that these three things are not the easiest things to do, particularly “thing three” – “when the time comes to let it go,/to let it go.”

Does all this saving of photos and mementos stave off the letting go? And after all, *is* “letting go” what we are meant to do for our emotional and spiritual well being?

What does “letting go” mean anyway?

We heard May Sarton, in another oft-quoted poem, affirm that our mourning is without end, that the strands of our wound and bound lives somehow grow richer with each loss, the dead moving through us... always and forever she seems to be saying. This doesn’t sound like letting go.

Or does it?

My understanding of grieving – and my own experience of grieving – actually squares with both Mary Oliver’s and May Sarton’s sentiments. For “mourning without end” does not mean holding on to what never again can be. It absolutely includes and must include a certain kind of letting go, letting go of life with this beloved person physically still by our side, in our world... but at the same time learning and experiencing that this person really does still live in other very real ways in our hearts, in our memories, in our lives.

Perhaps we look at our hands and see our father’s or mother’s hands. Or we hear a song that our friend loved, and we feel her presence once again. Or we glance at an old photo and a sweet memory is evoked of someone we loved who is no longer physically among us.

In some measure the sadness of a loss may never go away, as May Sarton tacitly acknowledges; for a living person cannot be *replaced* by a photograph or a story. But we do and can discover ways of living forward – as that person would want us to do – living forward and carrying in some measure the legacy of whatever gifts they left to us.

None of this happens all at once. And the mystery of living and dying remains. At least that is my experience, an experience that if anything grows stronger with the years and the accumulation of losses.

But it seems to me that my task in the midst of this living and dying, my task as a human being is to learn to live in the world as it is – yes a world in which we all sooner or later die, a world in which we love and mourn, a world in which we let go in some ways and hold on in other ways, a world in which, if we keep our eyes and hearts open, our love and empathy and compassion for one another can deepen with each loss.

Now, my original title for this sermon was “To the Light.”

What a strange title, one might say, for a sermon about death and loss – which after all can seem very dark indeed.

Yet over and over again we have reports at least from *near* death experiences of light, of moving toward light at the moment of death. Indeed, I found myself saying to

my mother during her last hours, “Go to the light... go to the light...” – even though on one level I have no idea what that means. But it somehow felt right to say it.

As for those of us left behind. Perhaps navigating the territory of grief, with its balancing of letting go and holding on, is itself a journey to the light, to a kind of awakening or enlightenment to living in the world as it is. And as I’ve been reminding us this morning, our experience of loss and mourning surely often evokes love, opens our hearts – and this is, is it not, a kind of light.

Perhaps, then, a complete title for my sermon should be “Letting go into the Light.”

The writer Annie Dillard, in her early highly acclaimed book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which is filled with meditations and essays inspired by her time living alone in the woods by a stream called Tinker Creek, wrote that if we’re paying any kind of attention at all, we look around and notice that the creatures die, that everyone dies – and then eventually it just might strike us that, well, we must not need life! She alludes to scripture to this point: “Your needs are all met. But not as the world giveth.”

Well, what to leave us with this morning – in the midst of our mourning?

Perhaps just these few things. (Which might be close to everything when it comes to finding the wherewithal we need to carry forward, letting go and holding on in appropriate measure in the midst of all this living and dying.) Just these few things: We have each other. We can bring love to each other; we can bring light to each other. And though this world is filled with plenty of suffering and pain and ugliness, there is beauty too, in sunrise and sunset, in morning breeze and evening stillness, in brightening and falling leaves, in mountain and valley, in sea and stream.

May this love and care and beauty – which altogether may amount to the mystery we call the God in whom we live and breathe and have our being – be enough. I believe it is – now and always.

So may it be.