

“Remembering Who We Are”
May 25, 2025

Deuteronomy 30:15-16, 19-20
Luke 12:6-7

In the late afternoon last Sunday, I was driving home, heading south down Mormon Trek. And around Walden Square the traffic in both directions was suddenly coming to a stop and backing up. It was a strange time for a traffic jam in Iowa City. As I got closer and put on the brakes, I could see the cause: two geese were leading some six or seven goslings across the road.

They hadn't pressed the button for the walk light. They didn't have the help of a traffic cop as the ducks and ducklings apparently do in Boston. They simply stepped out into the street, depending on the kindness of strangers. And kindness is what they got. The drivers did not seem impatient. There was no honking, except, perhaps, from the geese.

As I sat there, I said to myself: “There's my sermon for next Sunday.”

Human beings showing a little compassion for other living things.

A slight, momentary concern for the more vulnerable.

A willingness to wait.

It was an occasion so simple and yet so profound in these days when crushing the weak is acceptable and even encouraged; when basic human decency seems so lacking.

Here was a different—and a better—way: At our best, we are willing to pause and to hold others in our care.

Parents bring a child into the midst of this congregation and we respond by promising them and their child “our love, support, and our care.” [It happened when Bruce and Kathy brought Eric to this place all those years ago and after decades of that love, support, and care.] It happened again today when Eric and Lauren brought Reese here. We stopped what we usually do, I held a vulnerable infant, and with water we welcomed her into the faith and family of the church.

We pause. We make way for the vulnerable. We hold others in our care.

Every year around this time, we recognize the high school seniors in our congregation as they graduate. It's a pretty simple thing. We give them a gift certificate for Prairie Lights—and, you know, that's such an old-timey thing. It's not a plastic card with a magnetic strip and a code that you can use online. It's a paper certificate that someone wrote on. To use it, you have to go someplace in person and interact face to face. We also give the graduates what I call our congregation's highest honor—a cake! [You know how that is: we name the organ after someone—give him a cake! Someone wins a Pulitzer Prize—give her a cake!]

And, along with the gift certificate and the cake, we give a book in which people have taken the time to share their thoughts and good wishes. Our advice might seem as old-timey as those gift certificates, but the words are heartfelt. We remind them that they are not going into the uncertain world alone. When they were baptized, we promised them our love, support, and care. That promise is still good. Graduates, we are here for you.

We pause. We make way for young people just starting out, facing all the usual challenges and those challenges peculiar to our peculiar time.

This weekend of course, is one of those times when we as a nation pause.

We stop, if only for a few moments in the rush of activities, to remember the men and women who have died in the horror of war, recalling their sacrifice even as fighting and dying continue around the world. Their deaths are a paradox. Well-armed and protected by the military might of our nation, they were still vulnerable—vulnerable enough to die on battlefields, on ships, in the air, in hospitals.

The poet reminds us: “They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.”

During his first term, our president canceled a visit to an American cemetery near Paris because he did not believe it important to honor American war dead, according to four people with firsthand knowledge of the discussion that day. In a conversation with senior staff members on the morning of the scheduled visit, he said, “Why should I go to that cemetery? It’s filled with losers.”ⁱ

Let us, the living, take a different approach and pause. Let us make way for honor and for grief. We remember the vulnerable in their dying. In doing so, may we make way for deeper commitment to peace rather than brassy patriotism or self-absorbed disregard.

We pause. We make way.

We make way for goslings, we welcome a child, we support graduates, we mourn the dead of wars—we pause for all these, because such actions are good—very good—in and of themselves.

We also pause so that in and through such actions we might remember who we are.

When we pause for geese or other creatures in the road, we remember that we are one part of creation among many others. The affirmation that we are of more value than many sparrows both assures us of God’s great love and reminds us of our calling to be stewards of this earth and of all lives in it.

When we pause and welcome a vulnerable child in baptism, we remember our watery beginning that is central to who we are as Christians.

We do this because forgetfulness is a constant danger for people of faith.

Standing across the river from the Promised Land, Moses calls the Hebrew people to be vigilant in remembering who they are and where they came from. They are to remember both the bad times of slavery in Egypt and the joyful time of God’s deliverance through the waters of the Red Sea.

Without the memory of slavery, they could lapse into a smug self-righteousness. Without the memory of deliverance, despair and hopelessness would always be companions on their journey.

In baptism, we remember.

We remember that we were once aliens, strangers to the love of God. So, we continue to respond to the call to welcome all people, to announce God’s great, inclusive love.

We remember that God loves us unconditionally. So, we affirm that all of who we are—and all of who others are—is lovable.

We remember that God forgives us unconditionally. So, we seek to be those who, in turn, forgive others.

Baptism helps us to remember who we are.

Baptism means everything that water means: cleansing, refreshment, life. Baptism, like water, also means death. Early congregations often built their baptismal fonts in the shape of tombs.

Our beginning in baptism is like death—death to old ways, death to all that separates us from God and one another.

But there is more to baptism than death.

If the beginning is death, the end of baptism is life. If baptism looks backward to our dying with Christ, even more it looks forward to our rising with Christ. We know death and we hope in the resurrection. That hope is so strong and fierce that we find the courage to say even to small children and their parents: “Welcome to the journey!”

When, as a congregation, we pause to express our support for graduates, we celebrate together—which means we laugh and cry together. We share the love of God with each other—but we’re not just about ourselves. We recognize that we are called to show that love to a hurting world as well.

In doing this, we remember the love of God that calls us to look with the eye of compassion, to listen with the ear of understanding, to open hands and heart in reaching toward others.

We remember the forgiveness of God that calls us to humbly recognize the log in our own eye more than the speck in the eye of our neighbor.

We remember the abundance of God that calls us to give freely as we have freely received, to be merciful because we have received mercy.

And when we pause to remember the horror and death of war, we remember who we are as a nation.

War is devastating and wars have been fought for noble and ignoble goals, usually mixed. But we need to remember the lives lost in war because women and men fought against fascism and authoritarianism—that neither our nation nor the nations of the world might succumb to the will of an autocrat. We remember those—especially the formerly enslaved—who fought to end slavery and maintain the Union. We remember those who fought that the basic rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness might ultimately extend to all people in this nation.

Lives were lost so that this nation might be a place of welcome and freedom for all. Lives were lost so that there would be equality under the law for everyone within our borders.

Great wealth and great power are being used trying to undo these things. But our memory of who we are must prevail, welcome and freedom and equality must prevail, so that those who died, indeed did not die in vain.

This weekend we pause that we might make way for the vulnerable around us and around the globe.

There are great forces at work urging us to forget, to ignore, to discount all such people.

You might have read about the recent argument between billionaire Bill Gates and billionaire Elon Musk. Gates said DOGE's slashes to the US Agency for International Development would lead to “millions of deaths.” Musk responded by asking for proof.

I don't know if Gates has provided any evidence, but Boston University mathematician, Brooke Nichols, did the math and concluded that “Because of the funding freeze on President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, an adult life will be lost every three minutes and a child will die every 31 minutes.

USAID's tuberculosis programs averted about 3.65 million deaths in the last year alone. Cutting USAID's tuberculosis prevention and response programs will result in an addition death from TB every seven minutes. The clock is ticking.

This weekend, even as the clock ticks on so many things, we pause. We make way. We remember who we are as people of faith.

Let us continue in the way of Jesus Christ, remembering who we are.

ⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/>