Today we participate in Memorial Sunday. A day when we participate together in the journey of grief and look back at this past year remembering those we have lost. I want to spend a few moments reflecting on the idea of bearing witness to pain and grief and loss and then we will have a time of remembrance together as a congregation.

So this phrasing of 'bearing witness' to our pain and grief is something that stuck out to me while reading Hillary McBride's book, Holy Hurt. In this book she speaks about the process of healing from trauma. She speaks specifically about spiritual trauma, but I think what she says can apply to all trauma, pain, grief, loss. But she says, "trauma asks for a witness as part of its healing" (p. 170). And by witness, she says, "the witnessing I am talking about means to be with and really see the reality of what happened." (p. 164). It means being present with the suffering, the grief, not denying it, avoiding it, minimizing it. Now, the process of grief may very well include moments of avoidance and denial. I think that is natural and understandable. This idea of bearing witness just means that somewhere along the journey of grief, in order to move towards healing, the depth of it has to be faced.

A couple of months ago, I preached on the book of Job and I found myself reflecting again on what we see in that story when thinking about Memorial Sunday and this idea of bearing witness to our suffering and grief. If we remember the story, Job experiences tremendous loss and finds himself in the midst of intense grief. And while he is in this grief, unfortunately his support from those around him is lacking. His wife comes to him and tells him to curse God and die. Then three of his friends come. We're told "they agreed to come so they could console and comfort him." (2.11). And I would say they actually do a good job of this at first because we read "They sat with Job on the ground seven days and seven nights, not speaking a word to him, for they saw that he was in excruciating pain." (2.13). These friends saw the pain he was in, the intensity of his grief, and were just present with him. But unfortunately it didn't last and when they start talking the support is not there. They advise Job that he must have sinned terribly to bring on this suffering so he should repent before God so that the suffering can end.

When I reflect on Job's wife and friends I feel one of the reasons they failed Job as his supports is because they viewed Job and his grief as a problem to be solved rather than a person to be embraced. They naturally wanted Job, this man they loved, to feel better, for his grief to end. We likely would all feel similar. So these characters offered advice to this end hoping Job's grief and suffering would stop.

But we see in the story that this does not help or support Job. His wife's comments offend Job and he rebukes her. To his friends he says: "miserable comforters are you all." (16.2), and "How empty is your comfort to me" (21.34). And he pleads with them "Have pity on me, O you my friends" (19.21).

My sense is that what would have provided some manner of support for Job in his suffering, is simply for these people to have been with him and bear witness to his pain. To be with Job offering compassion, empathy, and non-judgment.

Are any of you fans of the TV show Parks and Recreation? In this show, there is an episode where there is a couple, Chris Traeger and Ann Perkins are their character names, and Ann is pregnant. Her partner, Chris, wants to support her so every time Ann is uncomfortable or complains he tries to solve the problem which leaves him feeling overwhelmed and Ann feeling misunderstood. Finally Chris' friends take him aside and tell him "What she needs from you is to just look her in the eyes, nod your head, and say those two magic words: That. Sucks." (season 6, episode 12).

Now, this is from a sitcom and is meant to be funny…yet there is some truth here. When someone is in the midst of grief and suffering sometimes the most helpful thing to do is simply be with them and offer empathy and compassion, to bear witness to the pain.

One of my seminary professors, Bill Webster, a man who lost his wife at a young age and then devoted his life to helping people understand the process of grief, said, "simply validating the significance of grief and legitimizing the albeit difficult process is the greatest gift we can give to any grieving person." (p. 43). Later he says, "Accept [the grieving person] as they are. Do not try to 'fix' everything; they are not looking for answers or solutions at this point, because there are none and no suggestions will satisfy." (p. 82). Simply bear witness to the pain. Our suffering, our trauma, our grief, our loss, needs a witness in order to eventually find some healing. It wants to be brought into the open, acknowledged and sat with.

And this witness can come in a few different forms. Thus far I've spoken of others bearing witness to our suffering and grief. Friends and family coming alongside of someone who is grieving and offering compassion and empathy, acknowledging the depth of hurt. I hope that our church and the people herein can be part of this for each other.

But this witnessing can also come from within ourselves. We can bear witness to our own pain. Meet ourselves with compassion. We can call this Inner Witnessing (McBride, p. 176) when we allow ourselves to acknowledge and sit with our pain and grief and are *gentle*, *loving* and *kind* toward ourselves. In my sermon on Psalms recently I quoted Hillary McBride when she says, "avoiding and suppressing emotions are what harms us, not the emotions themselves. When we learn how to feel and allow the feelings to move through our bodies in the way they naturally want to, they actually pass. They come like waves rolling in and building until they crest and then settle on the other side. Experiencing them allows them to move through, not suppression, shaming, control, or avoidance." (pp. 134-135). The pain, the grief, wants to be acknowledged and witnessed and allowed to move through.

And in addition to others or ourselves bearing witness to our grief, we can also see God in this role of bearing witness. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 we read: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." The author here draws attention to the reality that the God we worship can be a Source of compassion and comfort. We can sense their presence with us in the midst of our grief, meeting us with compassion, bearing witness to our pain.

All of this is to say that bearing witness to the loss, the suffering, the grief, that we or others are experiencing is a significant part of the healing journey. And bearing witness simply means seeing and acknowledging the pain, validating the depth of despair. Meeting the hurting one, even if it is ourselves, with compassion and empathy.

And I think this is where Memorial Sunday can come in. This is a day set aside to remember those we have lost, to acknowledge the journey of grief many of us are in, and it can be an important part of bearing witness to the pain as a small step toward healing.

So whether you are someone in the midst of grief right now who needs their pain witnessed, or if you are someone who can be that witness for others, I want to invite all of us to take some time now to remember, reflect, bear witness.

Time for Remembrance

There will be many in each of our own individual lives who we remember and grieve this morning. And as a congregation we think of members and family of members who have passed, especially from this past year but even beyond. From this past year we think of:

- Betty Friesen: Dec. 31, 2025
- Mary Hildebrandt: Edna's sister – Feb. 21
- Tena Wiebe Friesen: Louise Buhler's sister. April 17
- Doug McKinnell: May 1
- Brian Penner: June 30
- Donna (Garry sister-in-law): Nov. 13 ??
- There are others I'm forgetting I'm sure and we'll have opportunity to speak their names shortly.

But as we spend some time remembering these people we've lost, during this time you're invited to participate in a few ways:

- You are welcome to just stay where you are and simply spend time in silence, in memory, in prayer.
- You are welcome to offer a hug of comfort to someone if you feel led and they welcome it.
- We have a number of candles on the altar here. Anyone who wishes to come forward to light a candle in memory of someone they've lost is welcome to do so.
- We also have a microphone set up. If you wish, you are invited to simply speak the name of the person you are remembering, or a few words about them but there is no pressure to do that either.

We just want to provide opportunity to remember and reflect however you feel comfortable doing so. To begin this time, let's read the Ritual of Remembrance in your bulletin and on the screens:

Ritual of Remembrance (adapted from VT #920)

L: O Ancient of Days, you have been our dwelling place from generation to generation. Here, in your Ground of Love, even death becomes a time of seed planting, from which new life eternally springs forth.

All: We give thanks, O God, for your life and love that have no end.

L: On this day we remember those who have gone before us in faith, hope and love. We feel the pain of their physical absence but trust in their continued spiritual presence in the great cloud of witnesses who bless and sustain our daily living.

All: We give thanks, O God, for your life and love that have no end. Amen.

I now invite you to take some time to remember and reflect, after which I'll pray for us.

3-5 minutes of remembrance. Piano.

Before we sing a closing hymn I offer this prayer adapted from a book entitled Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human by Cole Arthur Riley.

Prayer:

"God who knows death, [we come before you in grief and in remembrance. There are voids in each of our lives and in our life as a congregation. We remember especially Doug, Mary, Tena, Betty, Brian, and their families. There are numerous others on our hearts and minds.] **As we grieve the departure of one[s] we loved, help us to feel what we feel, be it sadness or anger or nothing at all. Remind us that grief has many faces and no timeline. Grant us both patience and honesty**….[As] we honor their passing, and the tragic mystery of mortality, show us that this void is not a void, but a portal. Grant us solemn imagination for new forms of being after death, and comfort us as we give thanks for their life….God our maker, may the one we grieve find peace at last. Comfort us as we seek peace ourselves. May we learn how to continue living in their absence; may we uncover new forms for their presence. Let their death remind us of our own mortality, that we would live and love with awareness of the gift of each unpromised day. And as we stare into the portal of this passing, may we find beauty in our ending, however solemn that beauty may be." (pp. 277-279). Amen.

Hymn

Benediction: As you go from here may the God of compassion and all comfort grant you peace, comfort, and hope even in the midst of grief, lament, and remembrance. May you feel the freedom to travel the journey of grief, whatever that looks like and however long it takes, with the knowledge that you are not alone. Amen.

Resources

McBride, Hillary L. (2025). Holy Hurt: Understanding Spiritual Trauma and the Process of Healing. BrazosPress.

Parks and Recreation. Episode "Farmer's Market". Season 6, episode 12.

Webster, Bill. (2011). Understanding Bereavement. The Grief Journey, Inc.