

Pentecost proper 18, September 10, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Ezekiel 33:7-11, Psalm 119:33-40, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Last Tuesday I was in Port Townsend standing on the sidewalk outside a store waiting for Rachel. A elderly person in a lightweight wheelchair came along, being pushed quite slowly by a younger relative. Just as they drew level with me the chair hit a bump in the sidewalk and stopped. So the pusher just pushed a little harder and off they went – no harm done! So I looked down to see why they stopped. The sidewalk was made up of concrete squares, and in each one there were hand prints, and names, and a date. I'll bet you've seen that before! Either a fundraiser, or recognition of what those folk had done for the store next to these concrete squares.

That's a very human thing to do! And you see it everywhere in small and large ways – the carving of a heart and initials on a tree – as in “Kilroy was here”. Or the naming of a building, or part of a building after someone: The William M. Burnett Fireside Room; Campbell Hall. This is what we do as human beings; something we've done since before humans were able to write! From cave paintings to comments by Roman soldiers, we've always done it.

Why? Well, it adds a sense of permanence to our lives; this is how we mark out a space that says “I am here” or “I have been here” – a place that I (or we) put down a marker that acknowledges our existence as more than transitory. That's exactly what a grave's headstone or a columbarium niche's bronze face plate, or a War Memorial like the Vietnam War Memorial are saying: they're the ultimate markers that say we existed, that we have been here, that our identity endures. Without them, memories fade; people disappear.

This is about human legacy, about what we leave behind. In their own way, the readings all have that word behind what they are saying today, and what they've been saying for the last 3 weeks.

Ezekiel says that the legacy the Chosen People are creating is done through the gift of right behavior, and right actions; only that way will they be able to create and maintain a stable and authentic religious community. If you value that community, if you respect its core identity, if you want it to endure then you will to try to live in this way so that it does.

Paul says that the legacy the Roman community is creating is done through the gift of love; that ultimate gift will continue to build a stable and authentic community. If you value that community, if you respect its core identity, if you want it to endure then you will to try to live in this way so that it does.

Jesus says that adopting appropriate standards for addressing communal flaws will build a stable and authentic community; the legacy of such actions is the spirit-infused identity of the community (“wherever 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, I am there...”) If you value that community, if you respect its core identity, if you want it to endure then you will to try to live in this way so that it does.

Right actions, lived out of love and honesty, with respect are all markers of community. That's the Christian community's legacy, our gift, to the future.

Creating such a community requires some sacrifice; The New Testament - in fact the whole Bible - is clear about that. On our way back from Pt. Townsend Rachel and I stopped at her father's grave in the Sunnyside Cemetery west of Coupeville. There were quite a few graves with cut flowers on them, and there were several with silk flowers. I understand the silk flowers - they stay "fresh" longer (though eventually the sun bleaches them). Silk flowers are well-intentioned, but they miss the point. For instance, you would never send silk flowers to a funeral! It's because in using cut flowers we're sacrificing something beautiful and living and transitory: it's costing us something that's ephemeral and "in-the-moment" as well as the financial cost. Cut flowers are a simple way of saying about the deceased *"I value you and who you were and are for me and so I'm sacrificing something that costs more than money, something beautiful."*

The way in our culture we assign value to things is by placing a financial value on them. In part that's because money is often also a 'self-symbol' for many people in our contemporary culture. Money defines things in a concrete way! As I've observed before, the PBS program "The Antiques Road Show" doesn't simply tell those who bring their personal treasures exactly what they have, they always tell them its value. And - as if this is a holy thing! - a bell is rung when the value is displayed. And the folk who brought these things to be identified and valued all say the same two things: "thank you," and "I'm not planning on selling it"! The monetary value is informing them in a quantifiable way the object's value, even though it already has other values that are intangible - call it sentimental, if you will - for them. Money makes concrete that intangible value.

When it comes to matters of faith, though, we can easily get confused over the role of money. In one way, it appears that Jesus doesn't help; remember that phrase "you cannot serve God and money"? (Matt. 6:24). And we see that as an either/or proposition about the use of money. It's not! If you believe that then you are losing sight of the word at the beginning: "Serve." Jesus never says that to be a person of faith you cannot have anything to do with money"! What he says is this: "Are you serving God and using money to do so, or are you denying God and serving money to do so?" That always has contemporary relevance, and especially today, in our consumerist culture that's ultimately all about denying God by losing ourselves in the pursuit of and then disposal of money in ways that are often not healthy for us and not healthy for our communities.

Legacy and sacrifice are about individuals and communities creating something of value - something memorable - for the future. Creating something for the future requires heavy lifting in the present. What legacy, what sacrifice, are we willing to make? There are many things we can do.

Most obviously, as we look at two consecutive hurricanes about which the title "Storm of the Century" is a grave injustice to their mega-size, one legacy gift we can make is to work for a greener planet. The sacrifice would be the ways in which we change our lifestyles to reduce our carbon footprint.

Another legacy gift would be a healthy democracy, which will involve time and money.

Closer to home, what about the future of this community of faith? It is, I think, self-evident that all of you obviously value this place and what happens here or you wouldn't be here. It's also self-evident that without you, this place would not be here. What we do here, what we stand for, the ways we impact our local community as individuals as well as a Christian community, the way we worship – all the things that make up this place – all are a part of the identity of this place. Each of you will value some parts more than others; none of you hope this community will disappear – nor do I. How do we make sure that doesn't happen? How do we ensure our legacy for this place? What sacrifices are we willing to make?

Today's readings remind us that our identity as a Christian community, the legacy we will create and bequeath, is predicated on taking right actions, lived out of love and honesty, with respect for each other

To preserve that legacy, to continue to build on that legacy, requires of all of us the sacrifice of involvement, and the time we commit to it; the sacrifice of the gifts we have for the building up of the body; and the sacrifice of our money – all of which will insure the healthy and continued presence and healthy impact of this place in and on our local community, into the future.