



From the Pulpit: May 29, 2022

Seventh Sunday of Eastertide—Memorial Day—Communion

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

John 17:20–26

A Collective Murmuration, VI: Murmuration of Remembrance

This is the last in the Easter sermon series Katie and I are preaching called *A Collective Murmuration*, drawing on the metaphor of a flock of starlings flying in concert. Katie has said that “the synchronicity of starlings lives in the realm of miracle, especially as we consider the ways in which humans long for synchronicity, but find ourselves divided, segregated, bifurcated, and detached from one another.”

Our scripture readings in this series come from the Gospel according to John, which was written within the context of the early church community’s experience of conflict, the source of which is not entirely clear. Today’s text comes from the prayer at the end of Jesus’ farewell address. Jesus’ prayer not just for the disciples, but for every generation of his followers to come that we might know the unity and glory of God.

“It is the practice of emulating Christ that becomes a murmuration of remembrance, a boundless collective memory.”

I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my

glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

‘Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

Let’s take a moment to rest in the knowledge that Jesus is praying for us. Yes it is a prayer for the early church community and the church to come. It is also a prayer for you, for me, and us that though we do not walk the earth at the same time as the son of God, we know the love of Jesus because it is passed on from generation to generation to the church universal throughout time. It is the practice of emulating Christ that becomes a murmuration of remembrance, a boundless collective memory.

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In this series you’ve heard that starlings are excellent imitators of sound. Mozart adopted Star because she was singing his piano concerto. Starlings can mimic human voice, frog calls, music, and even machines. On the Scottish Isle of Coll there lives a flock of starlings whose song includes the sound of a two stroke engine—an engine which lies rusty below the ruined hut that is their nesting site.

The starlings today never heard the sound of the engine, instead the sound of home was passed from one generation to the next unnoticed until decades later when a BBC recordist¹ discovered them.

Though it might be surprising that birds have this ability, we are well aware that human history and identity are passed on from generation to generation. Not too far from Coll (at least by American measures of distance) is Glatton, England, a place of collective memory for families of the US Army 8th Air Force 457th Bombardment group who flew B17 flying fortresses during World War II. Last year a mural was dedicated to the 729 airmen who were killed, missing in action, or prisoners of war.

This place, to which I have never been, is woven into my family memory. My grandfather, Paul E. Miller, the handsome man in the front row center, was a flight engineer who flew 30 missions over occupied Europe out of Glatton. As those B-17s flew in formation like silver starlings, my grandfather's plane was in the lead. The odds of survival for those aviators was something like $\frac{1}{4}$, so completing 30 missions is a rare feat for which, he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters. To my knowledge, he spoke very little about these harrowing flights, each one resulting in significant plane damage. He did not speak of the mission to Poland where after receiving heavy fire the pilot dove thousands of feet out of formation in order to throw the propeller to save the crew. He did not speak of the emergency landing on an airstrip smaller than an aircraft carrier where he was listed MIA for 3 days. He did not speak of the targets: German munitions factories and a dam which held a reservoir used for isolating heavy water for nuclear power.

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I know these stories because my grandmother collected the recollections of his crewmen, the photographs, and other memorabilia to give to her grandchildren, so that the brave song of 457th Bombardment group will be passed from generation to generation. One Glatton resident who offers tours says that once the aviators came to remember. But now “Those aviators’ families come over in their place. ... I [am] able to show them where their father or grandfather would have laid their head at night. [I walk] them up the runway that he would have flown from. [I take] a photograph with them holding a picture ...” His motivation is to remember people who should never ever be forgotten.

On Memorial Day weekend we pause to reflect on our communal values and those who died protecting them. Let us commit to remembering. Without them and the many sacrifices of the greatest generation, the evils of Hitler’s extremism would have gone unchecked.

Just as we seek today to ensure that the memory and courage of our service men and women is passed down, and just as generations of starlings on Coll sing a long memory of the sound of home, collective memory shapes us and forms us as followers of Jesus who we know but have never met in the flesh. When tragedy strikes again and again, our faith reminds us that we are God’s and that we are to live a life of love and peace in this divided world. Our Christian memory and identity stretches backward to the chaos before the foundation of the earth and forward to the vision of all creation in full, joyous communion with God and one another.

But we are not there yet. The last few weeks—months—years are a stark reminder of that. And so Jesus’ prayer for the generations to come has space for grief and lament that weighs heavy on our hearts today.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p05jmp3x>

Jesus prays for unity for the church. But it is a kind of unity that feels peculiar to the conflicted church in the first century and to us in a world whose media and economic and political systems seem to thrive on division. The unity Jesus prays for the future believers is not political unity, or agreement on religious doctrine, but unity found in an indwelling **relationship**. Jesus' prayer is a swooping, flocking, swirling dance of unity: God in Jesus, Jesus in God, Jesus in the disciples, the disciples in the generations to come and therefore Jesus in us through one another, "so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know." How do we imagine this eternity of oneness unbounded by space and time?

Here is a child's drawing of what I think of as abiding love. It shows the artist drawing her friend in heaven, and her friend, Nico who died in a car accident last fall, drawing her on earth. It is a drawing that helps us to imagine love and presence beyond space and time. You may know it was created by a 10 year old Alitha Ramirez, a victim of the Uvalde shooting who now rests in the arms of God. As our hearts ache, let Alitha's vision live in our memories as an image of deep abiding love and communion with God and one another.

Jesus prays that we might be one, and also that through the inbreaking love of Christ that we might know God's glory. But again it is a **peculiar** glory in which we remember God's love revealed even in death on the cross. It is love that knows suffering, lament, and grief. But it is love that endures, passed from generation to generation. This kind of glory is unfamiliar, peculiar, strange but as one commentator explains "By glorifying God, Jesus makes visible the presence of God; thus Jesus' glorification also glorifies God."²

² Gail R. O'Day and Susan Hylen, *John*, Westminster Bible Companion, p. 162.

This peculiar glory that reveals God's love often takes the form of serving the least, the lost, the excluded, the oppressed, and the hungry. Deacon Heyward Patterson lived such a life of service³.

He was a leader of the Tabernacle Church of God, but as a deacon his ministry stretched beyond the church walls. He served at the Glenwood Avenue soup kitchen. He shuttled people living in a food desert to the

Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, where last week he was killed in the parking lot while helping to pack groceries into a car. Even as the evil of racism killed him, his life glorified God in his ministry of ensuring his neighbors did not go hungry.

Like Heyward Patterson, I am a deacon. There are denominational differences among deacons, some are ordained clergy like me, some are lay people. But there is unity in our call to service and compassion, rooted in Acts.

The ministry of the deacon is symbolized by a bowl and pitcher, which reminds us of Jesus the servant, who washed the disciples' feet just before the meal where Jesus gave the farewell address and prayer we read to-

day. Deacons may be teachers, public servants, police chaplains, advocates for children and gun safety, ethical advertising executives, professors, and church leaders. They show us how we might serve in a multitude of ways that glorifies and reveals God's love and presence.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/nyregion/buffalo-shooting-victim-funeral.html>

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The bowl and pitcher also remind us of our baptism, the flowing font of God's grace that claims us and forms us into God's people, which like the starling's song, is passed from generation to generation. In addition to committing to seek and follow Jesus Christ in the baptismal liturgy, mainline protestants often include the renouncement of evil and the commitment to resisting injustice and oppression. Our baptismal identity transcends all other identities. So let us remember our baptism as we offer our thoughts and prayers and then move to do what is ours to do, using our own unique gifts in our often inadequate ways to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

Though we may be called to create peace, well being, and flourishing in different and diverse ways, Christ unites our work into a divine murmuration. Friends, let us remember who and whose we are as we approach the table where communion with and in Christ is made visible. **All glory to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.**

—The Great Prayer—

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Before you, O Wellspring of Life, we fall silent. Our words, inadequate to express our hearts, tender and alive to this day. We notice the breath within, the slowing of heartbeat to match the possibility of peace that you place in our midst. Give us your peace that passes understanding. Calm our worried, weary soul. The world around us builds an altar to fear, and we cannot hear our own thoughts, the news out of a small school in Texas a reminder that all is fragile. We are a people called to remember. As we approach your table of love, bread and cup placed before us, we remember the way you faced the fragile and violent realities of the first century, and now we remember the 21 children and teachers who died this week in Uvalde. (chime 21 times). We feel "the wonder and terror of being alive" (Carlos Castaneda). We feel grief at the magnitude of tragedy and we feel ill equipped to forge a future with hope in a world divided.

Unite our nation, one heartbeat, one breath, prepared to love and ready for a renewed hope. Let us commit to remembering. Let us remember our common hope as a nation.

Let us hear your longing, O God, a longing for a world where children and teachers can learn without fear. You call us to participate in one another's lives. To live fully into the language of love, entangled in one another's well-being. So renew us, O God. Deepen us here at your table. Mark us for service. Bring us closer to one another, a community alive with creative imagination toward a future marked by thriving. Let us bear one another's burdens. Let us participate in each other's lives, working for a common good.

Walk with us, O Christ, down to the valley, where unexpected transformation is still possible. We lift up those who are suffering. Those who mourn. Those who face the unthinkable. Those who feel alone. Those who feel the inevitability of unwanted change. Be with us, O Christ. Help us to see healing unfold, unpredictable and unplanned. Help us to notice your life-altering presence spilling out in our midst.

Turn us now to this table. Accompany us O Christ. Today transform us and these familiar things—bread and cup—in the same way you continually transform the world around us. Bless bread and cup, wheat and grape, farmer and harvest, seed and sower. So that in sharing these simple elements, we might taste and see your goodness, and glimpse what it is to be in communion with you and with one another. Through Christ, in Christ, with Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, most holy God, now and forever.

And hear us as we pray together the prayer Jesus teaches us...Our Father....Our Father.... Amen.

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