

Story and Meditation: Never Since

October 25, 2020

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints Sunday at Church of the Holy Cross UCC

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Matthew 22:34-46

by Eric Anderson

They were great pals. Best buddies. BFFs – that’s Best Friends Forever for those who don’t hear teenagers very often.

They didn’t actually use those words, since they were not human teenagers or human beings at all. I’m, er, translating from the ‘apapane.

When they were just out of the nest, they enjoyed their early flights together, exploring the limits of their wings and their forest, racing with laughter among the trees, teasing their parents, listening to their grandparents’ stories, finding the best nectar and comparing the taste of spiders, singing duets that changed every day.

BAFFs. That’s Best ‘Apapane Friends Forever.

They both found life partners. They built nests. They marveled at their eggs and their hatchlings. They fed their chicks, they taught them to fly, they built another nest.

In between, they raced with laughter through the trees, they teased their friends and children, they listened to their parents’ stories, they found the best nectar and they compared the taste of spiders, they sang duets that changed every day.

One day something didn’t happen. Each day, you see, when they weren’t caring for chicks or building nests, they met for their races and laughter and stories and nectar and spiders. They’d come singing through the forest, and though they never set a place the day before, the songs would bring them together.

On this day, only one of the two birds sang.

One of his friend’s daughters found the lonely half of the Best ‘Apapane Friends Forever as he perched on an ‘ohi’a branch. They sat in silence for a while.

“What happened?” he asked at last. She didn’t know. “He just didn’t come back,” she told him. “We’ve looked. We can’t find him. It could have been anything.”

He felt the stiffness in his own wings and knew it could have been anything. It could have been an 'io, or a cat, or his friend may have taken a nap and just not woken. They had been friends for a very long time, a very long time for a pair of 'apapane.

They were silent for a while longer, and then he started to sing. It was a new song, lilting and a little sad, with a lift to the end of some of the phrases. As he sang, he cocked his head to one side as if listening for a responding voice.

"Do you hear him?" asked his daughter.

He paused his singing to say, "A little," and looked at her. "I might hear him better if you sang with me."

And so they sang together, the two 'apapane, and in all the 'ohi'a forest, those who heard them also heard the echo of a third voice, a voice of hope and longing, a voice of a Best 'Apapane Friend Forever.

This is our observance of All Saints Sunday. I look forward to this service each year, with its mixture of sadness and sorrow, of honor and hope, of remembrance and renewal. I tear up to remember how precious the souls we remember have been to me and to us. I tear up as well to know that they are in better care with God than they ever were with us – as strong as our love and commitment are, that of God is greater, deeper, and stronger. I watch family and friends come forward as the names are read to light a candle in recognition of life and love. Two years ago it was my turn to hear my own father's name read as I lit a candle for him.

It is a very special time of our church year. Here we are, however, in the midst of a global pandemic and in desperate need of reassurance and comfort. We long to be together. Instead, we are, except for those assisting in this service, at home.

We're not getting the comfort we wanted.

Moses, as the author of Deuteronomy noted, had accomplished astonishing things. As the spokesperson for the God of their ancestors, he had challenged Pharaoh and all the power of Egypt. God warned, Moses spoke, and God performed. Despite a record of stubborn hard-heartedness on Pharaoh's part that may be the worst in history, eventually the Egyptians were forced to let their former slaves go. The waters came between them, and the people were free.

Moses carried on as leader of the fractious tribes, petitioning God successfully for aid in obtaining food and water. Moses received God's instructions to order the emerging nation in law, both civic and spiritual. Moses stayed with them, and urged God to stay with them, despite frequent disappointments.

For how long? Who knows? In Jewish writing over the centuries, "forty" is a stand-in number for "a long time." Forty days and nights in the ark, forty days and nights on the mountain, forty

years in the wilderness, forty days in the desert – that last one is Jesus. It's a useful literary figure. Forty: "More than long enough. Maybe too long."

Kathryn M. Schifferdecker writes at Working Preacher, "Moses is in a now-and-not-yet time. He stands on the border of the Promised Land, but will not enter there. Whatever the reasons for Moses' situation, perhaps it speaks more directly to people's experiences than had he been permitted to enter the land. I daresay that most of the people who hear this story this Sunday will know something of disappointment and dreams unfulfilled. Many people will recognize the feeling of being in a now-and-not-yet time, trusting in promises that have not yet been fully realized, but living by faith nonetheless."

Moses died in that distinctive now-and-not-yet time, literally on the border of the land he had led his people to, on the boundary of their future. He didn't get what he wanted, either.

We all die in a now-and-not-yet time. The boundary for each one of us may not be so dramatic, and for Moses so achingly near, yet we each pass with a future ahead of us. Each of those we honor today had some notion of what a tomorrow in this world might be like. Each of us had some idea of what, if things had been just a little different, some tomorrow could have been.

Kathryn Matthew writes at ucc.org, "We might wonder what Moses, the solitary leader but just one person in a great multitude, felt, looking out on that sweeping, majestic horizon of hope and promise. Satisfaction? Gratitude? Triumph? Accomplishment and glory, too, perhaps--and yet, and yet... a sense of limits, a sense of longing, a sense, perhaps, of loss."

Yes. Limits, longing, and loss.

The life of Moses made an enormous difference in the lives of his people. I'm sure God could have brought freedom to them without Moses, but I know for certain that God chose Moses to make it happen. The lives who honor today also made an enormous difference to someone, to many someones. They made an enormous difference to you. Just like Moses, there will never be anyone else like them. Just like Moses, never since their passing has there been or ever will be someone who can live and be and build like they did.

In Jewish tradition, mourners are reassured with the words, "Let their memory be a blessing." It is such a profoundly meaningful wish. Memory, as we know, can comfort us or it can torment us. Let all those who honor today bless us as we remember them.

In the Christian tradition, we also raise the hope of new life and restored relationships to come. This cannot and must not be a denial of the sorrow and loss we have experienced. Those things are real. As April Fiet wrote on Twitter this week, "I am concerned about the way we have confused denial and hope. Denial tries to paint a rosy picture by ignoring the tough and the hard stuff. Hope stares despair in the face, and chooses to believe anyway... I believe in a hope that shines bright enough that no darkness can overcome it. I believe in a hope that triumphs

over despair rather than minimizing it. The good news is not that the bad news has been glossed over, but that it has been triumphed over.”

Today may we be blessed by precious memories of precious souls. May we let our tears flow in tribute to the love we cherished, and the loss we have suffered. May our tears linger because we need their healing touch, especially when we cannot embrace one another. May our tears also fall from our faith and hope in a new life to come, of a power that surpasses death, and of a love that never dies.

Amen.