

## **Set Me As A Seal Upon Your Heart**

*A sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

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When I was a child, every now and then, I had a recurring nightmare about an evil clown with an axe who hid body parts in the kitchen cabinets. Gruesome stuff, my young nightmares, and they may have had something to do with an eerily lit collection of clown portraits above the guest bed at my grandparents' house.

When I became a teenager my recurring nightmare changed. In this one, I would drive around and around a circular parking garage, but with a sense of foreboding, I would realize each time that I didn't have any idea how to drive. Every time, the top of the garage loomed, when I knew that I would drive off the edge, with no idea how to stop the car. Teenage years are so full of gaining and losing control.

These days, I have yet another occasionally recurring nightmare. The entire contents of which is simply me sobbing, the whole time. Dream world flooded by some un-named and un-nameable grief, I simply weep, and sometimes wail. In the morning I wake up drained and exhausted, and off-kilter for the day.

This dream is not so fantastical. It is a sensation I have experienced before and am guaranteed to experience again. Loss.

If nightmares tell us something about our fears, these are some of mine. Clowns, lack of control, and, poignantly, loss.

Not so rare, these fears. Except for the clown, they may, in fact, be universal.

Hard as we may grip for control, safety is not guaranteed in this life for us or for those we love. And as deeply as we love in this life, our inevitable losses will strike us just as deep.

This is the crux of living.

We will lose beloveds, and we know we will, and we already have and it breaks our hearts again and again.

But we keep on loving, because that is why we are here on this earth. To give away pieces of our hearts, though never into entirely safe-keeping.

This year so far we have talked about courage in September and now death in October, and it is no accident to see them side-by-side.

Simply loving other finite creatures may be the most courageous thing we do in this life.

Forrest Church writes: "The courage to love is nothing less than the courage to lose everything we hold most dear. Love another with all our heart and we place our hearts in jeopardy, one so great that the world as we know it can disappear between the time we pick up the telephone and when we put it down. Love is grief's advance party." (*Love and Death*)

In the same passage, he calls love grief's advance party *and* life's only perfect promise. And the thing is, both are true. Love is our most precious gift, and the source of our greatest fears.

In Massachusetts, I knew a little girl with a terminal diagnosis of a rare disorder, and I knew her family who loved her fiercely. She was a bright, beautiful girl of 8, and by the time I met her she had already undergone a multiple organ transplant and was facing a complication of the immuno-suppressant drugs necessary to make her new organs work. The "complication" was cancer.

As she and her family walked a razor thin line between fighting cancer and fighting multiple-organ rejection, one day I found myself with her mother blurting out the cliché so often used in such unimaginable circumstances. "I don't know how you do it."

Cliché but true, I couldn't fathom how they survived loving a fierce, wise 8 year old who faced death every day with grace and deep faith.

The answer was simple, as it always is. We can because we must. There is no other option than to love each other fiercely and urgently and to live the life we have together.

They had a family slogan they shared with me. Live anyway. And, I would add an unspoken one that they lived as naturally as breathing – love especially. Live anyway. Love especially.

Miraculously, that bright, beautiful little girl is now 12, and her family just keeps on living and loving anyway, each day made brighter and more beautiful because they know exactly how precious it is.

It is too much, what they face. But, apparently, we can survive too much.

The poet Wendell Berry writes, "like the water of a deep stream, love is always too much," It is always threatening to jump the banks, flood our hearts, and lead us deeper than we know we can bear. Love is always too much.

But love is also strong as death, fierce as the grave, and though it carries us into certain loss, it has power enough to hold us and to bring us through.

Love is life's only perfect promise, and it is worth its own cost. For who among us would give up the love of parent, partner, child, or friend in favor of never loving nor losing at all? Much as it twists our hearts, much as it floods the banks, the choice is clear. The only choice is love.

And when death comes -- a thief into our lives, when loss rolls through on a flood of tears, stricken in silence or wailing lament, love alone remains.

In the strange world of grief, love remains. When meaning seems to flee, and the colors of the world drain to grey. When minds move heavy and slow and tears fall bitter into bowls of salty soup and cups of tasteless tea, love remains – the reason for every tear, and each one's soothing balm.

In ancient Roman times, tears of mourning were caught and kept in small glass vials – physical proof of the respect given to the deceased. They were often placed in burial tombs, a sacramental offering of thanks and praise for a life.

Though sometimes slowed by shock, our tears too, in every time of loss, are wet testimony to our love – and thereby sacred.

Artist Rose-Lynn Fisher has created a series made up of photographs of her tears seen through a microscope – tears gathered at different times in her life, starting in a time of grief.

About her project Fisher writes “Tears are the medium of our most primal language in moments as unrelenting as death, as basic as hunger, and as complex as a rite of passage.

They are the evidence of our inner life overflowing its boundaries, spilling over into consciousness.

[...] It's as though each one of our tears carries a microcosm of the collective human experience, like one drop of an ocean.”

(<http://www.rose-lynnfisher.com/tears.html>)

Love is always too much. And our tears of remembrance, grief, and wailing lament are the overflowing spilling forth of that love.

Fisher's tear photographs are mysterious, containing fractals and sharp angles and partial patterns. Looking at them you can almost see a map formed from the salt and water and oils that make up our tears, as though the tears themselves could show us the route through to the other side of our grief.

And perhaps they can, perhaps they do, in their own time.

When we let them flow we discover in time that our grief in times of profound loss and mourning does not signal a loss of love itself, but rather its continuation and transformation.

The act of grieving sets our loved one as a seal upon our heart, as our love for them slowly, painfully stitches the rending there and leaves an eternal mark within.

Through the courageous act of loving in this world of loss, we fill our hearts eternally, moment on moment, memory on memory, seal upon seal.