

JOSEPH'S BONES

Exodus 1: 6-11; 13: 17-19; Joshua 24:32; Mark 6:6b-13

Union Church of Cupertino

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More than 20 years after he had been declared missing in action, my wife's high school friend and classmate, Wally, came home. Bone fragments had been found. They were tested, identified and transported with full military honor to Whittier, California, where they were buried in Rose Hill Cemetery. The members of Wally's family, his high school classmates, and neighbors found this homecoming a strangely satisfying event.

It makes a difference where our bones are laid to rest.

It certainly made a difference to Joseph. His brothers had sold him into slavery so he'd gone to Egypt under duress. As a matter of fact Egypt worked out well for him. He had risen to a position of authority and power. But Egypt was not home. He did not want to be buried there forever. Joseph foresaw the day when Egypt would not always be a land of opportunity for the Israelites and he extracted from his kinsmen the promise that if God should come to Egypt as surely God would come if God's people were in trouble... If God came to lead the Israelites home they would take his bones with them. It took almost 400 years but Moses kept that promise and despite the haste of the Hebrew departure he found time to locate the bones of Joseph, dig them up and take them along. Moses kept those bones with him for forty years as Israel wandered in the desert. He handed them off to Joshua who had them buried at Shechem in a piece of land once belonging to Joseph's father.

Some people care a lot where bones are laid to rest?

Lord Byron had strong opinions. In a letter to a friend written five years before his death, the poet expressed a wish not to be taken home:

I am sure my bones would not rest in England.... I believe the thought would drive me mad on my deathbed (were I to suppose) that any of my friends would be base enough to convey (them) back... - letter to Murray - 6/7/1819.

In the piece of Hebrew scripture that bears her name, Ruth speaks her strong preference. What was important to her was not place but proximity - she wanted to be buried beside the woman who had befriended her, Naomi, her mother-in-law:

Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge... Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried. - Ruth 1: 16,17.

Have you decided where your bones will be laid to rest?

These are deep waters... and I can't speak with any authority for I have not made a decision for myself. I'm still watching what other people are deciding hoping that something will help me make up my mind. My parents chose to be buried in a cemetery in North Andover, Massachusetts. It happens to be where my father's mother is buried - but not his father. His father died first and was laid to rest in a Roman Catholic cemetery. Later his mother, being a Protestant, was not allowed to join him. But the presence of a relative was not the reason my mother chose the burial site in North Andover, MA. She chose it for the view. As wrote the poet Shelley:

It might make one in love with death
to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley

There was a time when I found my mother's reason ludicrous, but, now, when I return to New England and stand in that spot, it satisfies.

My mother-in-law chose to be cremated and asked that her ashes be scattered over the Pacific Ocean. At the time it seemed like a fine idea but, lately, the Pacific Ocean has seemed so vast, so shifting. My wife and I have discovered we need a more particular, and stable focus for our memories.

My father-in-law was specific about being cremated but left no instructions as to the disposition of his ashes. If you won't tell anyone, I'll let you in on a family-held secret. His ashes are in the ground beside the foundation of the Episcopal Church of which he was a member, right under the memorial window that bears his name. This was done with full collusion of the rector but the Vestry does not know. The Vestry couldn't decide whether to allow the burial of ashes or not. They kept postponing the decision. We just went ahead. That placement still satisfies.

What do I want to have happen to my bones? I don't know, but I'm working on it. I'm developing a set of standards that I hope will result in finding just the right place. My standards are somewhat like the deal breakers your Search Committee used in finding just the right minister, the basic musts...

The first standard is that *I want my bones buried in a place of freedom*. Have you noticed that whenever a society takes on a repressive edge the first victim is the cemetery. Hooligans paint swastikas or throw down stones to demonstrate their superiority. Have you noticed how such desecration of the dead inevitably leads to the persecution of the living and the loss of liberty for the weak, the meek, the different. When Joseph foresaw that Egypt would become a repressive society with a privileged few living off the labor of many he wanted out: "Promise me that you will take my bones to a place of freedom, which, of course, is always the place to which God leads."

A second standard is that *I want my bones to reside in a spot where God is honored*. Once I thought that this would be the old right-next-to-the-church cemetery. But then I learned

that suicides were not allowed to be buried there. They had to be interred outside the wall. And it made a difference whether you were a Roman Catholic, Methodist or undeclared. A cemetery from which anyone is excluded is not a place where God is honored for God has pronounced every life of worth. I like the fact that so many California burial grounds are multi-faithful, inter-faithful and I look forward to the day when the Buddhist section and the Jewish section and the Shinto section will blend together and it will be hard to tell where one ends and the other starts. There God will be honored, as we honor all of God's children.

I want my bones to be where the past is honored. The needs of the present should never be allowed to completely outweigh respect of the past. I remember reading in Thomas Lynch's first book, The Undertaker, about the elderly woman who came to his funeral home to collect the ashes of her sister. Her sister's children could not be bothered - ashes had no meaning to them, but the sister cherished any reminder of the goodness that had been. Mr. Lynch writes of watching from his window as the woman carried the container to her car. She opened trunk but then closed it without putting the receptacle inside. She opened the back door but then closed that as well. Finally, she walked around to the front passenger door, placed the box on the seat and drew the seat belt around it.

When the ancient cemeteries were taken up in Paris so that new streets could open up the city, the bones were carefully removed to the catacombs and if you have visited there you know they were artfully arranged in grottoes along those miles of underground tunnels.

I want my bones to be buried where the past is honored.

And I want my bones to lie in such a fashion that they will give witness to the goodness of love. I don't like this business of one being scattered on the waters and another being buried beside a church; of one lying in Catholic ground and the other in Protestant soil. I want my bones to be beside my beloved which requires a group decision and a decision that depends greatly on who dies first, and what other love might come along. I would not want to mix a new relationship for my wife if she wanted, but all things allowing I want my resting place to be a witness to love.

So I have not yet decided, but I've got a list and mulling over that list it's becoming clear that the places such as meet my criteria don't just happen. They are made. And to make them will require my everyday effort and yours. They will depend upon our continuing affirmation of the importance of freedom; that the Declaration of Independence speaks about everyone. The existence of suitable places will need our unwavering support of the bill of rights. It too is for all people and is not void when we become afraid. The right place for my bones will depend upon our continuing witness to the infinite worth of God and on our stewardship of the gifts of the past. And who among us would not benefit from an increased estimation of the worth of love. If we leave these things to other people there will never be a good place for our bones.

The poet e.e.cummings once sang:

next to of course god america I

love you....

Let us affirm all three of these: God, America, love. In these three rest the hope for my bones.