

A People Re-membered (Summer Saints: Toni Morrison)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 19, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So, I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

(Ezekiel 37:1-14, NRSVue)

Some houses seem to hold memory in their walls.

In Toni Morrison's great novel *Beloved*, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is haunted. The people living there have escaped slavery. They are free in the legal sense, but the past has not obediently remained in the past. It lingers in the rooms, in the body, in the strange and terrible ways memory can inhabit a life when what has been endured has never truly been laid to rest.

And in Morrison's hands, that haunting becomes something larger than a ghost story. It becomes a way of speaking about history itself, about the past that does not disappear simply because people would prefer to stop talking about it. Families can be haunted. Communities can be haunted. *Nations* can be haunted by what has been buried without ever really being faced.

Toni Morrison spent much of her extraordinary literary life listening for the voices inside those hauntings. Born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, she became an editor, teacher, and one of the great American writers of the twentieth century, receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Again and again, her novels entered those places where history had left wounds and silences, and asked us to see the human lives hidden inside them.

The story behind *Beloved* began with one such life. Morrison encountered the 19th-century story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped from Kentucky with members of her family and, when capture threatened, killed one of her own children rather than see that child returned to slavery. There's no easy way to speak about such a thing. The horror lies not only in the act itself, but in the world that could drive a mother into such an impossible place, a world in which her children could be owned, sold, taken from her, and returned to bondage by force of law. Morrison entered imaginatively into the silence around that history, and from it came *Beloved*.

She didn't treat slavery as something safely over and done with, a closed chapter in a history book. She understood that some wounds reach so deeply into human lives that they continue to shape the living long after the original violence has passed from view.

Which may be one reason why the strange vision from Ezekiel feels like such an appropriate companion to her work. For Ezekiel, too, is taken to a place where history has left its dead behind. The prophet finds himself standing in a valley filled with bones. They're *everywhere*, and they are, as the text emphasizes, *very dry*. Whatever happened here happened a long time ago. Ezekiel was a prophet among exiles. Jerusalem had fallen. The temple had been destroyed. People had been killed, displaced, carried into Babylon. The world that had given shape and meaning to their lives had been torn apart, and the people themselves knew exactly what this loss felt like: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

That is the voice of a people who have survived and yet don't know whether survival is the same thing as life. And before God asks Ezekiel to say anything about hope, God makes him *look*. The Spirit leads him through the valley and all around the bones. Ezekiel has to *see* where he is. He has to take in the extent of what has happened. God does not hurry him past the devastation toward a happier ending. Before there is any word about *life*, there is this long walk through what has been *lost*.

Toni Morrison understood something about that walk. She refused to let slavery remain an abstraction, something reduced to dates and statistics. In *Beloved*, history enters the body and soul. It lives in motherhood, fear, memory, longing, shame, and love. The people damaged by slavery aren't reduced to symbols. They become *particular* again. That is one of the deepest gifts of Morrison's work. She restores human presence where history has so often converted human beings to categories.

And standing among the bones, Ezekiel hears the question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel does not answer with any easy confidence. He says, "O Lord God, you know" – or put a

little more accurately, “Only you know that.” Maybe that’s the only honest answer when the damage is real enough. For what *does* it mean to live after catastrophe? *Can* a family move forward without being forever possessed by its wounds? *Can* a *people* carry a truthful memory of devastation without allowing devastation to become the whole meaning of who they are?

In *Beloved*, slavery is over, and yet in another sense it’s not over at all. The protagonist Sethe has escaped. She lives outside the plantation. She is no longer legally owned. But the house is *still* haunted. The end of bondage doesn’t mean the end of everything bondage has done. Fear can remain. Deep grief can remain in a family. A nation can change its laws while old habits of seeing continue to shape whose suffering is believed, whose dignity is protected, and whose life is regarded as fully worthy.

But then, with Ezekiel, God says something astonishing: “These bones are the whole house of Israel.” The valley is filled with what looks like remains, *but God sees a people*. The world may see bones. *God* remembers a people.

And this is where the word *Beloved* begins to carry such weight. Sethe’s child had died without a name. *Beloved* was the single word carved upon her tombstone, and later it becomes the name borne by the mysterious young woman who enters the house. Slavery depended upon *reduction*. Human beings were turned into property. Families could be separated by sale. Names could be changed. Bodies could be bought – and used. The whole machinery of the system required people to look upon another human being and refuse to see a whole person there.

But Morrison’s fiction refuses that reduction. A person is more than what has been done to them. A wounded life remains *a life*, particular and irreducible, still bearing a name that history cannot finally erase.

Beloved.

Perhaps that’s what remembering is at its deepest. More than recalling facts, more than arranging dates in proper order, *re-mem-ber-ing* restores people to the human story. It gathers back into our common life those whom violence scattered and history tried to leave behind.

But Morrison also understood that memory is not simple. The past in *Beloved* must be faced, but it cannot be allowed to possess everything. There are memories we *dare not* lose, because forgetting them would abandon the dead all over again. Yet those who carry such memories must also somehow find a way to live.

This is where Ezekiel’s vision becomes so powerful. The bones are not discarded, but neither are they left forever in the valley. What has been scattered comes together, and bodies stand where bones once lay. But *still* there is no *breath* in them. Truth can be told. Memory can be recovered. What was scattered can be gathered. But *renewed life* is more than anything Ezekiel can manufacture.

“Come from the four winds, O breath,” God says, “and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” The Hebrew word is *ruach*: wind, breath, spirit. It’s the mystery of divine life moving where death has done its terrible work. And this is where Christian hope reaches beyond even our best remembering. We tell the truth because truth is necessary. We honor the dead. We gather what has been scattered. But *resurrection* remains the work of God.

We know this most fully in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, who comes from the grave still bearing the wounds of what happened to him. Easter does not declare that Friday never happened. The risen Christ does not return untouched by history. He returns with wounds still visible, and yet those wounds no longer contain the whole meaning of his life or the limit of his future.

That is a hope deep enough for Toni Morrison’s world and ours: not the erasure of what has happened, but the opening of a future the wound itself could never have imagined. And these are hardly abstract questions for us now.

We have just celebrated 250 years of American independence, and even as we celebrate, we find ourselves in the middle of renewed arguments over what parts of the American story should be told, and how honestly they should be told. National museums and historic sites have become places of controversy. Exhibits dealing with slavery and racism have been criticized in some quarters as divisive or anti-American. At the President’s House site in Philadelphia, material telling the stories of people enslaved by George Washington became the subject of removal, protest, and litigation – and ultimately, were simply replaced. The Smithsonian itself has recently had to defend the responsibility of museums to tell a full and evidence-based history.

Now, of course, people can disagree about interpretation. Historians argue among themselves, and museums always make choices about emphasis, and those choices should be examined. But beneath all that lies a deeper question that Toni Morrison helps us hear: What happens when the *telling* of a wound is treated as *more dangerous* than the wound itself?

There is a temptation in every community to confuse innocence with wholeness. We would like a story about ourselves in which the lines are clean, the heroes untroubled, the injuries safely confined to another age. And when someone insists upon remembering those whose lives *complicate* the story, it can feel as though something precious is being taken away.

But *truth* does *not* diminish a people. George Washington can remain indispensable to the American story while we also tell the truth about the human beings he enslaved. We can give thanks for the soaring promise of the Declaration of Independence while remembering those who lived outside that promise for generations. We can love a country without demanding that its full and honest history flatter us. In fact, a mature love of country may require *exactly* this kind of remembrance. For a nation that cannot tell the truth about its wounds will *continue* to be shaped by them in ways it does not understand.

The church of Jesus Christ should understand this better than most. Our faith is *built* around remembrance! “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus says. *Every time* we gather at the Table, we remember a body broken by imperial violence – *and* a life raised by God. Christian memory does not sentimentalize the past *or* leave us imprisoned there. It brings the truth of what happened into the present *so that grace may open a future*.

The church, then, should be a place where truthful memory and living hope are *held together*. A place where wounds can be named without becoming the only name we know. A place where people who have been reduced to categories are restored to particularity, where the dead are remembered and the living are given room to breathe.

We cannot undo the past, and we will not find wholeness by pretending it didn’t happen. But neither are we left alone among the bones. The God who remembers is also the God who breathes: “Come, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” – to the glory of God! Amen.