

Sermon at New Song Episcopal Church

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The Miracle of Grief and Lamentation

Several weeks ago three of our parishioners shared their stories of grief with us in a very memorable Spirit School. I was moved by the depth and force of their grief, by the range of content in their accounts, and by their willingness to be vulnerable telling such personal stories. I also now realize that sharing such grief helps individuals through their struggles and simultaneously ties people together.

This morning, rather than focus on Jesus' miraculous powers in the two stories in our gospel account, I want to look with new eyes at the two people who sought his help. If I had to give my sermon a title it would be "good grief."

If you're like me and several other of our preachers I've talked with, there often seem to be misfits between the lectionary passages

with the gospel readings. But perhaps today we can turn what seems like a misfit into major insights about the gospel.

Notice that all the non-gospel passages are about lamentation, collective grieving. Scholars tell us that nearly half of the psalms are about grief and lamentation, several Old Testament books (think of Job and Lamentations) are almost totally about lamenting, and almost all the passages involving “conversations” with God involve laments.

In contrast, most of what we hear from the Gospels and through our music and worship is about “good news.” Grief and lament only occasionally appear and often obliquely. I think grief is central to the two miracle stories we encounter today.

Therapists tell us that people often mistake grief for anger, so strong is the connection between them. You can hear anger in David’s anguish about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. His lament says: “You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.” His anger is so strong he desires divine retribution!

I think it's crucial to recognize and give anger its due when suffering loss. Anger is such a strong emotion that it can clear away much that prevents us from facing some hard realities. But it is a mistake to get stuck in anger, for the grief cannot be resolved with anger even if it is a stage in the process. In their own ways, Jim Porter, Esther Smith and Dorothy Whiston talked of coming to this realization as they grieved.

We also need to come to terms with the "why" of that which we grieve. And of course, for any monotheist it's at this point that the problem of evil becomes most poignant: if God is so good, why did this evil occur?

One response is the strategy this passage from The Wisdom Solomon takes, the devil did it: "through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it." But few who grieve are long satisfied with this scapegoating strategy. If God is all good and all powerful, how can another deity create evil?

No, somehow we must give God his due and plead ignorance. Such is the strategy in Lamentations: "For the Lord will not reject for ever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." Setting aside the seeming contradiction in this

passage, it's clear that the writer sees the need to embrace God's goodness despite the incomprehensibility of the suffering that causes grief.

The psalm puts it succinctly: "For his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye, his favor for a lifetime. Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning." The depths of our grief are necessary, perhaps, but if we dive into the deepest grief we will eventually emerge healed. Or the psalm again: "You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy."

Thus the promise is that if we engage in the grieving process with diligence, honesty and willingness to be vulnerable and work through the pain, we will be healed. Much has been said about grief because we will all suffer loss and it's easy to get lost in grief unless we find help. The message of the Bible, really, is that help is available if we avail ourselves of it.

Which is exactly what the woman who has suffered for a dozen years finally does. Think of her situation: she is an ordinary person (not privileged) who has a doubly lowly status: she is a woman and she bleeds

endlessly in a traditional society that judges both conditions negatively. I imagine she has gone through some of the phases of grief endlessly: the anger, despair, confusion, hopelessness. So what does she have to lose by doing the unthinkable: reaching out beyond the social taboos that bind her to touch the cloak of a holy man? Reaching out in desperation, making herself terribly vulnerable, with the hope that a touch with the divine will heal her. I know of few other acts in the Bible that define faith as clearly and concretely.

In its own way, the example of the father of the little girl Jesus heals is like that of the woman: he is in shock, in profound grief at the death of his beloved daughter, and he breaks taboos to seek Jesus' help. Here is a respected pillar of the temple asking an itinerant and rather infamous healer for help. In other words, he risks a great deal in reaching out to Jesus. He too found help through his leap of faith.

Perhaps it would be wise for us at New Song to brave the dangers of "too much negativity" (after all, the gospels are "good news") and spend more time learning from the deep spiritual experiences of grief. Together, as well as individually: collective lamentation. For one thing, much of what we grieve is shared: worldwide poverty and immigration,

the threats to and diminishment of democracy, our environmental crises.... We all need the help we could get through collective grieving, lamentation.

Mirabai Starr, who founded the online grief community, *Holy Lament: The Transformative Path of Loss and Longing*,” talks of how grief can bring people together. She says: “What I often say about my work with grieving and bereaved people is that it’s much more about transformation than about consolation. There are other places you can go to feel better, but to me grief is not a problem to be solved or a malady to be cured. It’s a sacred reality to be entered.”

Starr goes on to talk about how experiencing a profound loss, of the sort our three members discussed, can uncover our longing for God that often gets covered over by everyday loss, granting us special access to loving intimacy with the divine.

Starr continues: “Death is complicated and powerful. It’s that threshold space that we get to experience sometimes between this world and a larger reality that we’ve always intuited to be true.... It brings us into sacred space whether we like it or not.” As

we heard in our Spirit School, there are many other losses besides the death of a loved one: that breakup of a relationship, a serious health diagnosis that changes everything, an injury that reweaves the way life used to be. I guess any kind of loss that involves the death *of who we used to be* is a powerful catalyst for this kind of encounter with the sacred.

Starr continues: “We’re an extremely grief-phobic culture, and it doesn’t help to have the religions on top of it saying, ‘Go this way. There lies transcendence. You can meditate your way out of your pain. You can pray your way through to relief from suffering. In fact, you can bypass it all together if you buy into this set of beliefs or practices or faith claims.’” The combination of grief illiteracy in the culture, and the emphasis of many religious structures to get us to rise above the messy realities of our humanity, is a recipe for avoiding grief.

Starr experienced how individual loss allowed her to enter into collective belonging:

“What I experienced when my daughter died was two things. One was that nobody could possibly know what I’m going through right now. But quickly on the heels of that was, ‘Oh, every person ever

who has experienced the death of a child knows.’ I was realizing in the bones of my own body ... that there had been mothers throughout time whose children had died and mothers right now [whose children are dying].... We all belong to each other. In some ways that was the first time I ever took my seat in the web of interbeing—when I realized that I belong here and we belong to each other. Even if right now it was my turn to be held by that web, I couldn’t imagine it yet, but I knew somehow, someday I would be able to do some of that holding of the other mothers to come. And I have and I do.” Amen