

“Sitting With Our Grief”

2 Samuel 21: 1-14

I started this week planning a completely different sermon for today, a sermon which invited us to claim the power of gratitude in our lives. But as the week progressed, that sermon would not write itself. Even as I composed the weekly Theology Tuesday based on the story of the Ten Lepers, I could hear the Spirit speaking, telling me what I had written was not what our community of faith needed to hear at that moment.

But I kept ignoring that small still voice because to do otherwise was too painful. It was too overwhelming. It just hurt too much to acknowledge the pain and loss that we are all feeling right now.

Not only has our community recently experienced a tragedy in our midst, as individuals, we have also experienced a large amount of pain and loss over the last few months as well. I know that so many of you are walking beside parents who are entering into a new stage of care or that you yourself have reached a stage in your life where conversations around help and care are changing. As your pastor, I simply want to take away the pain, offer words of comfort, but instead, I feel completely helpless as I walk this journey with you.

I know that many of you are experiencing the loss of a loved one in your lives right now, and again, as your pastor, I want to take away that pain, but instead, I feel completely helpless as I walk this journey with you.

Over the last few months, I know that many of you have experienced serious health concerns or know someone close to you who is experiencing serious health concerns and again, all I want to do is take away the pain, take away the uncertainty of recovery. As your pastor, all I want to do is to make everything better with words of comfort but all I have been able to feel is helpless once again as I walk beside you on this journey.

I share these things with you to simply say that I recognize that grief has been our constant companion for the last few months. I recognize that there has been a cloud of sadness surrounding this place for quite a while and I also recognize that it feels false for me, for us to pretend that life is continuing as normal around here. It feels shallow for me, for us to assume that just because we walked through the sanctuary doors this morning, that all of our grief will simply fall away. As your pastor, this week, I finally came to the realization that I would be failing in my calling to speak the Gospel at all times if I did not take the time to acknowledge the pain and loss which we are all feeling at this moment.

You see, one of the hardest lessons which I have learned, and yes, am still learning as I continue my faith journey is that in order for us to become the people God created and calls us to be, we need to be authentic, authentic in our feelings; authentic in our words, authentic in our action, and yes, even authentic in our grief. As people of faith, in following Jesus' example, we are called to show our wounds, to allow our wounds to serve as a source of strength and healing not only for ourselves, but for others as well. As disciples of Christ who hold to the promise that this world will not have the last word, even we know that sometimes the darkness is too much, that sometimes the pain and loss is so real that we begin to wonder if the promises, promises given to us by a God who loves us more than we can ever imagine, even we wonder if these promises are too good to be true.

As people of faith, we can be the first to admit that it can become all too much for us to bear. We can be the first to admit that when it all does become too much for us, our hearts break. Our worlds shatter and we grieve. Tears flow down our cheeks. Gut wrenching sobs echo from our mouths. And when that doesn't ease our pain, we get angry. We get angry at the unfairness of it all. We shout at our God, wondering why God would let this happen. We wonder where God is in all the grief and pain we feel. We begin to lose hope.

And when that happens, when we lose hope, we begin to question everything we thought we knew. Nothing makes sense anymore and we feel lost.

But that's not the worst part of it all. Do you know the worst part of our worlds shattering, and our hearts breaking? It is not the grief we feel. It is the false statements we tell ourselves, the number one being that we should not feel this bad, this lost, this hopeless, because after all, we, as people of faith, know how the story ends. That's what supposed to make everything okay. That's what supposed to stop our grief. That's what supposed to take away our pain but the fact of the matter is, it never does.

Which means that on top of our grief, on top of our pain, on top of our loss, we add guilt. We add guilt because we assume we aren't allowed to get angry. We assume that we aren't allowed to question God. We assume that as people of faith, because we know how the story is supposed to end, that we are not allowed to lose hope.

When the truth of the matter is that even we, the ones who hold to the promises given to us by a God who loves us so much, even we at times struggle to find the light in the midst of the darkness.

That's where I have been all week, emotionally, physically, spiritually. That is until Saturday morning when the Spirit spoke. Thankfully, the Spirit remembered that Sunday mornings happen every week, remembered that there is an expectation from this community of faith, me included, to come here to God's

sanctuary and hear news that reminds us that God is at work in this world, bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's people.

Thankfully, on Saturday morning, the Spirit spoke and invited me reclaim the practice of lament, to reclaim this part of our faith tradition to cry out to God when our hearts are heavy and our groaning is too deep for words. Thankfully, the Spirit reminded me that as people of faith, we are not called to pretend that we do not hurt, to pretend that we do not suffer or grieve. We are called to remember that no matter what, God is there in our grief. God is there in our anger over the unfairness of it all. God is there showing us compassion which literally means to suffer with, to suffer alongside someone.

God never tells us to get over. God never tells us to move on. God never leaves us alone. Rather God sits with us in our grief and calls us to do the same.

Not ignore it. Not try to fix it. Not offer hollow platitudes to make it go away. We are called to offer compassion by sitting with each other in our grief. Because when we do that, that is when the promises become real, that is when we find the light, that is when we become the people God created and calls us to be.

So at the Spirit's nudging, I want to offer up a different text for this morning, a text that invites us to sit with our grief.

(Read the Text)

There is a lot going on in this text and it holds a different sermon for a different time, but for now, but I want to draw our attention to verse 10, “Then Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens”

Now, Rizpah is not one of the Bible characters whom we usually talk about when it comes to our faith. But she provides us with a model for how to sit with our grief. Her willingness to allow her woundedness, her brokenness to serve as a source of strength, her courage to not pretend that life goes on as normal, the grace she gives herself to grieve reminds us that the beauty of our faith story is that it doesn't ignore the harsh realities of life. Rizpah shows us that we are in relationship with our God, that we are in relationship with one another. And because of that relationship, because of the compassion God has shown us, we as God's children are invited to bring it all, the good, the bad, the ugly and the breathtakingly beautiful, to bring it all, and share it with our God, to share it with each other because that is what it means to be in community with one another.

Rizpah is a mother who has lost her sons. She cannot and will not bury her grief. Rather instead, she sits with it. She embraces it. What I love about this text is that no one tells Rizpah to get over her grief. That's Job's story. But here, the vulnerability, the depth of pain and loss is shown and not ignored. And for me as a person of faith, that is what makes the promises of our God possible.

Because the amazing thing is our very biblical and faith tradition includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God. It is just that many of us have never been taught this and it is often missing in the worship of many congregations. Or even worse, we assume it is not allowed because that would mean we don't have faith in our God when the opposite is actually true. God is there, suffering along beside us in our grief. God is there, angry with us at the unfairness of it all. God is there, showing us compassion as God sits beside us in our pain and loss. God is there because God loves us more than we could ever image.

What Rizpah knew, what Jesus knew, what our faith tradition teaches us is that while we may long for something to do, long for something to fix the problem, we are called to be a people of prayer first. For it is in prayer that we find both strength and courage in the reminder that God will, in the words of Thomas Merton, not "leave us to face our perils alone." Our prayers invite us to a place where we are forced to look and listen for what God is already doing, and they send us out to witness to the radical idea that there is hope for this world in the peace and love of Jesus Christ.

'By naming our struggles, we prevent ourselves from being either dismissive of the strife or defeatist. Our laments become reminders that we are a people of

both the world as it is and is to come. It is a call to trust in the grace of God. These words of lament recognize that all is not as it should be.

Again, please hear me say I am not standing up here pretending I have all the answers. I am simply inviting us all to walk beside one another, to sit with one another in our grief and to show compassion to one another because as people of faith, even though we know how the story ends, right now, here in this place, we just need a little reminder of that good news.

So this morning, I am inviting us to reclaim the practice of lament. I am inviting us to sit in silence for a bit, to write down what is breaking your heart right now, what is overwhelming you right now, what is making you angry right now and then in a few moments, instead of the prayer of confession printed in the bulletin, I will lead us in a communal prayer of lament.

To the One who calls us Beloved,
We bring hurting hearts to you this morning,
Our fearfulness, and our worry.
Our anger.

Our world is not as it should be.

The ones with power make decisions for their own benefit
In a show of might,
they flirt with war and destruction
But the most desperate among us are left to fend for themselves.

In a world where hate is a virtue and exclusion a way of life
It is hard to hold on to what unites
It is tough to find common ground
Our humanity is lost in the scuffle.

Those of us who wish for peace forget how to make it
Or where to begin
And fall into hopelessness, cynicism or despair
We too begin to feel powerless
in the face of widespread suffering and systemic evil

Even our planet seems ready to crack
under the pressure of forces that are beyond us

Earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, volcanoes
Nature groans – and with it, your people.

Come, Lord Jesus, we pray.

When will you come?
When will you make right?

We are not strong enough, not wise enough, not good enough
To make peace, to bring healing

But you are,

You are the one who planted peace in our hearts
You are the one who will make it come to pass.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Strengthen the bruised reed.
Make weapons into ploughshares.
Comfort the weary and heavy-laden.
Make a home for the homeless.
Still the waters.
Calm the storm.

Come, Lord Jesus, you and your kingdom,
Come.
On earth as it is in heaven.
Your will be done.
Amen.

