

Defined by Grief or Grace?

Psalm 130, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Whitefish UMC

August 9, 2009

- † Since this morning's scripture and this sermon deal with relatively heavy subjects and it's summer and time for some light-heartedness anyway, let me begin with a humorous story:
- † Have you ever said something to somebody that you later regretted? A man named Bob Monkhouse says he got angry at the manager of his local dry cleaners and expressed his anger quite forcefully. He realizes now that he did not leave the manager with a very favorable impression.
- † He knows that because recently he put a red ballpoint pen in the breast pocket of his white shirt and forgot to put the cap on it. It made a ghastly red stain with a dark center all over the pocket. His wife said, "it won't wash out, so I'll try the dry cleaners."
- † So his wife took the white shirt with the dark red stain on the shirt pocket to the very dry cleaner with whom Bob had exploded. The manager took a long, slow look at the dark red stain on the front of the shirt and then looked sideways at Bob's wife and said quietly, "Good shot."
- † The truth is that we live in a broken world, and in this world, brokenness seems to have a habit of begetting more brokenness. The abused tend to grow up to abuse others. Those who had once been victimized and oppressed too often use their pain as a license to turn right around and oppress someone else.

- † The song that we just sang, “Out of the Depths,” reflects this truth. Based on this morning’s Psalm 130, the words acknowledge that “wounds of the past remain, affecting all we do.”
- † I first heard the words to this song while in seminary, where I became friends with its author, Ruth Duck. Known as one of our best contemporary hymn writers, Ruth Duck also teaches preaching and worship classes to seminarians. For some reason, I took a lot of classes from Ruth, and she was one of my favorite teachers.
- † Why, I wondered, was I drawn to her wisdom? I think it was because she was so honest about her humanness and the wounds of her past. She suffered from dreadful insomnia, but in her tiredness, she told me one day that she had “made friends with her insomnia” and was seeking to learn from it—and she did!
- † Ruth was never willing to dwell in the wounds and grief of her past, even though no one would have faulted her if she had. Abused for a long time by her father, she sought to understand how that experience affected her relationships. She taught her students to use the past to help them be more compassionate and kind to others rather than to strike out in anger and grief.
- † Most importantly, she taught us that we couldn’t do that on our own. We needed God’s help, and we needed each other. That’s true isn’t it? Then why is it so hard to live into?
- † Let’s take a look more closely at Psalm 130. If you were in church last Sunday, you heard some of the story of King David, who along with his greatness in battle and in leadership, had a terrible time with his family.

- † Last week's psalm is attributed to David after the prophet Nathan confronts him with his terrible treachery with Bathsheba and Bathsheba's husband. Psalm 51 is a confession to God and a plea for forgiveness.
- † Now fast forward to Psalm 130, in which David cries out in lament at the death of his son, Absalom. Absalom, the apple of David's eye, as well as a thorn in his flesh, has been killed in battle, despite David's orders to deal gently with him, even though Absalom has betrayed him.
- † "Absalom, Absalom, would that I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!" Such deep grief haunts great literature, as in William Faulkner's novel, Absalom, Absalom, in which a man's painful past defines and controls his relationships to the destruction of all that he loves.
- † And deep grief colors our lives and our relationships, too. Whether it is the loss of a dream, a relationship, the death of someone we dearly love, or the loss of our ideal self, we want to howl with anguish and sometimes anger. As your pastor when that happens, or when it happens to me personally, I direct our attention to the many psalms of lament, such as the one we read this morning.
- † You see, God wants us to express our grief and rage over it to him, whether we are a mighty king or a lowly servant. Grief and rage are not respecters of wealth or status.
- † Look more closely at the psalm for today: "Let your ears, O God, be attentive to my need." Notice that the one who cries out is operating on the assumption that Someone is already there to hear the cry. And

note that there is no blame directed toward God for the death of Absalom.

- † God did not will Absalom's death. Three spears in his heart were what killed the young warrior, that and a bevy of armor bearers who finished him off. There was nothing even a king could do about it.
- † But David was able to endure the terrible feeling of powerlessness because of his confidence that somehow, in the midst of it all, God was there, God would care, and that God would hear and respond to his plea. (Adams)
- † But you don't have to write a beautiful psalm to God to express your anger and grief. A cry in the dark will do. David cried out to God, and because he owned his grief, he was able to move to a deeper understanding of God's steadfast love and promise for him.
- † David, as we learned last week, was not a perfect person by any means, but he was sure that God didn't hold his failures and sins against him. As Joanna Adams says, "He trusted that no one was disqualified from being heard or responded to with divine love, including himself. 'If you, O Lord, should mark our iniquities, who could stand?' None of us for sure.
- † But there is forgiveness, with God there is comfort, even for broken people like ourselves. And so David moves from an incoherent plea to a statement of confidence in the mercies of God and then into a place where he can begin to hope again. 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope. More than a watchman for the morning, my soul waits for the Lord.'"
- † Yes, God is merciful, and if we open ourselves to God's healing grace, God will bring new life and new hope out of our grief, our pain,

and our anger at whatever inflicts us. The problem comes when we won't let God transform our woundedness, and instead we transfer it to others. You know the old saying about how we have a tendency, when we are hurt, to come home and kick the dog—literally or figuratively. And it is oh so true.

- † It even happens here at church. The church attracts and offers welcome to the wounded of the world, and that's a good thing. The trouble comes when we won't open ourselves to God's healing grace.
- † Instead we choose to be defined by our past grief, rage, and pain—when we could instead be defined by God's amazing grace acting in our lives. I know it happens to me when I don't pay attention. It happened to the people in the body of Christ in Ephesus, to whom Paul wrote in today's passage from Ephesians.
- † Interesting that Ephesus, a cosmopolitan city in what is now Turkey, was in many ways like our culture today. Filled with a wide variety of religions and philosophical ideas, the city brought people of many different beliefs and histories to it. Some of them were drawn to the fledgling church of Jesus Christ.
- † With that diversity in background and belief came conflict—conflict that threatened to divide the church. And sadly, it happens in almost every church, even when we profess to live by a standard of forgiveness, compassion, and grace. And that in turn provides a convenient excuse for many people to profess to follow Jesus but stay away from church.
- † “They are all just hypocrites,” you hear. And sometimes, yes, we are. Like David, we are all—too—human, but when we are living out our

- mission, we turn away from our mistakes to begin to be the body of Christ for the world that we are meant to be.
- † But some of us are simply too comfortable in our woundedness and in passing it on to others. And that's when we get into trouble. And we need the reminder of today's scripture. And we need each other. And most importantly, we need to acknowledge our grief, pain, and anger and offer it to God.
 - † It's amazing what happens when we do—both as individuals and collectively. This past week has been a difficult one. Although I had planned to drive down to the camp on Flathead Lake to assist with a program on memory and how it affects us, I was feeling pretty low. Was I really wanted or was I intruding? I didn't know.
 - † But something told me to go anyway. After helping with the morning program, which was about remembering and honoring the past but not letting it define you, I moved to the chapel to sit with the youth as they listened to music and remembered this past year and all that it had held—good and bad.
 - † After the teens from our youth group left, I noticed a young person, alone, and weeping. After sitting with this person for awhile, I asked if they would like to talk or just be. "I wouldn't mind talking," the person said. And so we did.
 - † Then this precious young person gradually revealed a dreadful experience that had transpired this summer. "I've told no one about this, and it's as if a dark knot is growing inside of me." What I want you to know, I said, is that this awful event is not who you are. If you can offer it to God and shed light and fresh air on it, it will not define you.

- † And so we worked together to develop a plan for God’s transforming grace to be received in their life. Later that night, we listened to music from an amazing band called “Eily Sky.” Their name comes from an Irish word, “eily” that refers to the kind of skies that we know so well here in Montana—full of contrasting light, purples, blues, golds, and reds.
- † The members of the band include a husband and wife who spoke about how even when life deals you horrible blows, God’s love will bring you through. After joking with the youth a bit, the couple revealed that their middle son, just a tiny boy, had been killed. So they knew what they were talking about. And their music echoed their words—with harp, cello, dulcimer, and drum and keyboard.
- † When I saw the person with whom I had talked earlier, I asked, “Could you hear that music and those words about grace reaching you through your grief—because they were meant for you?” The reply came readily and with joy: “Oh yes, I can! I play the cello, too, and it was as if God were speaking to me.”
- † Does it sound corny to think that if we let God in, our grief, self-doubt, and pain can become a vehicle of compassion for someone else who suffers? I do believe that’s what God was doing with me earlier this week. Although I wish I could say that everything changed in my life after that little miracle, it didn’t. Disappointments and the sting of criticism continued. And it was a struggle to stay centered in grace instead of grief.
- † “Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new heaven and a new earth. There will be no more tears or suffering or pain because

the former things have passed away.” You can bet your life on that promise. I do.

- † There is a bigger picture that we can see now only through a glass dimly. There is a new creation on the way, and we must never forget it. We must never ever give up and give in to despair. “This is the choice, isn’t it? Despair or hope. Hope takes life on its own terms and believes that, whatever happens, God is in the midst of it. Beyond the worst life can do is always the best that God can do.”
- † Throughout history, Christians have held on to this hope. Remember what Dr. Martin Luther King said upon the death of four little African American girls at a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. “Now I say to you that life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments...But if one will hold on, [one] will discover that God walks with you and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope and transform even the dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.”
- † Yes, God is able to do that. But we have to LET God do that. And that’s where we come in for each other. When we take the words of Paul to the Ephesians to heart and speak the truth to one another in love and forgiveness, nothing is impossible with God.
- † “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” May it be so. Amen.
- † **Sing Out of the Depths again.**

Souces:

Brett Blair, www.esermons.com

Scott Hoese, <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek>

Joanna Adams, “Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee,” <http://fourthchurch.org>