

In Grief and Grace

Psalm 130, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Whitefish UMC

January 29, 2011

- † In recent days we have known the truth of the poet William Alfred, “It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” And yet Jesus calls us to love wholeheartedly, despite the realities of death.
- † Tomorrow we will celebrate the lives and mourn the deaths of our beloved Eva and Bill DeVall. In the last week or so, some of us have had to experience the loss of a beloved canine companion, or of a precious child. Whether or not we grieve today, each of us must face loss and mourning at some time or another.
- † 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. You may know the story of King David, who along with his greatness in battle and in leadership, had a terrible time with his family.
- † Psalm 51 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 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 in a 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. You've probably heard people say “God doesn't give you more than you can handle.” In some cases, it's all I can do to bite my tongue to argue with them.

- † First of all, I do not believe that it is God who sends calamity or tragedy to us. I do believe that life can and does deliver to us more than we can bear sometimes. When that happens, it is God who bears what we cannot bear.
- † 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? Maybe so. But...
- † It was one of Tom's and my great joys to be season ticket holders at the Whitefish Theater Company with Eva and her daughter Renee. Our seats were very near each other's, and we always looked forward to the performances and the meal or drinks that accompanied them in our plans. A year ago, the theater put on a production of one of my favorite musicals, "The Secret Garden."
- † A couple of days ago, I overheard someone talking at the gym about that particular play and its performance, even a year later. She said, "My friend and I hated it—we walked out after the intermission—we thought it would be a fun, sunny, upbeat play, and it wasn't. It was grim." Ahh—I thought, too bad you didn't bother to allow the play to help you understand the nature of grief and loss, and the choices we make in how to deal with it.
- † The play, which is based on the children's novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, tells the story of young Mary Lennox, who loses both her parents to the cholera in India. She is sent to her Uncle Archie's in the Yorkshire moors, a dark and lonely place. No one wants her—they are all too busy with their own grief to notice her. All except for a servant boy named Dickon, and a housemaid named Martha.

- † You see, Uncle Archie has lost his lovely wife Lily, and is running away from his little boy, who has been confined to his room and his bed because his jealous and resentful uncle deems him to be sickly. Mary, when she receives love and encouragement from Dickon and Martha, then passes on her hopefulness to the rest of the household, including the little boy and his morose father.
- † Then the overgrown, weedy, and seemingly dead garden that had once been Lily’s joy when she was alive, begins to show signs of life, thanks to Mary’s careful tending. In the end, Mary’s loneliness and suffering allow her to show compassion to the people in the house, to encourage them to tend the hopefulness that is always present when we search for it. In the book, the children sing the doxology “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...” as the garden is transformed.
- † “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.

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>