

## ***The Ritual of Remembering: Responding to Loss***

**Psalm 121; Romans 8:35-39**

**Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese**

**March 15, 2015**

It is hard to know what to do with loss, whether the loss is our own, or someone else's. We can feel overwhelmed by loss, and overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of loss. We can respond to loss in a variety of ways; we can become bitter about how life has treated us, or entrenched in the grief over our loss; we can also ignore loss and move on as if it didn't happen; or we can face our losses, name them, look them in the eye and do the work we have to do to bring some form of healing.

As a planning committee, we knew that after hearing the stories of loss last week, that we'd need a week to reflect on how we respond to loss. So often we feel helpless in the face of loss, particularly other people's losses. And we can also feel guilty about our own "good fortune". As a community of care, how do we respond to someone's loss of health, particularly when others have just received a clean bill of health; or the loss of a job after someone else has just been promoted; or how do we respond to the pain of infertility and celebrate the birth of a new baby, or 50 years of marriage after someone else's marriage has just ended? Or how do we respond to someone's loss of faith in God when that is the centre of our life of faith as a community?

And while our communal response to loss is a complex thing, so is our individual response to our own personal losses--some of us can talk freely with others about our loss, while others of us find it hard to talk to anyone about it.

The scriptures that were read this morning, give us possible clues to how to respond, both personally and as a community. Psalm 121 is a Psalm of Ascent, a psalm probably used as a blessing by the priest as worshippers were leaving the temple to go home. The journey to and from the temple, particularly if you lived north or east of Jerusalem, was a dangerous one. Travellers were vulnerable to attacks by wild beasts or bandits who hid in the hills waiting for unsuspecting victims. The psalm names some of the dangers of travel: looking to the hills has them wondering where their help will come from; the

hot sun, which would strike by day; the moon which was believed to be somewhat dangerous, with superstitions that it caused illness or changed a person's behaviour; and the general "all evil". (Waltner, *Psalms*, BCBC, p. 595)

But not only does it acknowledge the presence of dangers on the road home, it also voices a trust in God and God's protection. "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. God will not let your foot be moved; God who keeps you will not slumber. The one who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand....the Lord will keep you from all evil; God will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore." This is a psalm of confidence and trust, even in the midst of dangers and perils. Both the dangers and the trust are named. The language of the Psalm begins in the first person--I lift up my eyes to the hills; where will my help come from?--and then shifts to the second person--God will not let your foot be moved; the Lord is your keeper. It's almost as if the individual is asking the first question and making a beginning assertion, and then the priest or the rest of the community is affirming that assertion and elaborating on the trust that has been named.

This is one model for a community--we can affirm, even in the face of loss, that God is still our keeper, that God will protect us and actually desires our safety. The community can affirm and proclaim what the individual may not be able to do. One possible response to loss is to affirm the foundation of our faith in a God who does not sleep, a God who will keep us from all evil.

Romans 8 helps us to affirm also this kind of confidence in a God who loves us. Again there is the acknowledgement that there are things that would overwhelm us--hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword. However, it is the love of God that is constant; these things will not separate us from that love, no matter how it might seem. Again one role of the community in responding to loss is to affirm that God's love is constant, that there is nothing that can come between us and that love.

Another image we've used in this series, is the image of holding these stories of loss. I hear that phrase has led to some questions about what we mean by

that--how do you hold a story of loss? Holding the story is how we care for the person who shared it. When I think about holding a story, it includes remembering that story and that person. My remembering them is a form of prayer, either naming them briefly to God, or more extensively praying for them. Holding in this way is both specific and can also be more general. Sometimes my holding feels like carrying--where I'm aware that that person or story isn't leaving me, but I'm also aware that it isn't me or my story. I think one of the key pieces of holding a story is that I'm not concerned with fixing it or offering a solution, or a platitude--everything will be OK. By holding someone's story, I acknowledge that I heard it, that I care about them, and I will hold them in prayer.

I think about this congregation as a container for all the stories of loss we heard last week--and those we haven't heard. These stories live in us; they are part of who we are as a community. We hold them--they just are; and they exist next to the other stories of joy that also are part of who we are. We hold these stories, remember them, pray for the people in these stories, and offer them the love of God, from whom they cannot be separated.

I also think another very real way in which we respond to loss is through our tears, our hugs and our presence. There are sometimes no words; but being present with a person speaks louder than any words could. Does it change the situation? Solve the problem? Diminish the loss? Probably not, but it is a concrete sign that we care and they are not alone.

Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*, looks at Jesus as a wisdom teacher, and then explores various spiritual practices as a means to travelling the path to wisdom, or as she says, taking on the mind of Christ. One practice she talks about is the welcoming prayer, and I have been thinking about this practice in relationship to how we respond to loss. This practice is "a 3-step process of *acknowledging* what is going on internally during a distressing physical or emotional situation, '*welcoming*' it, and *letting it go*." (p. 172) I can hear your protests already, because I share them--"welcome the loss? Welcome this illness, or this job loss, or this death? No way!" Rest assured, that is not what Bourgeault is saying. She is particularly concerned with what is going on with our bodies and our emotions during times of stress and distress.

Think about a particular distressing situation; now pay attention to where you are carrying that physically, or what emotion you are experiencing related to that distressing situation. What Bourgeault is suggesting in the welcoming prayer is that we acknowledge with compassion not judgement what is happening physically--'oh, look at that, my stomach is churning at the thought of seeing my friend with whom I just had that argument'; or 'my heart is racing at the thought of not having a job.' Notice what is happening, and then welcome it by saying, "welcome fear", or "welcome anger". There is an energy to these physical and emotional responses, and it is that energy, that sensation, that we are welcoming, and not resisting or denying. It is the emotion and the physical reaction we are welcoming, not the cause of them. We should never welcome a job loss, or an illness, but we can look with compassion on what is happening inside us, and we can welcome it, recognizing that our fear, or our anger, is trying to protect us, only it isn't very effective in doing so. It's the fight or flight part of our brains that brings on these sensations in response to a threat. Welcoming is the act of softening our internal responses, not tightening or bracing against them. It is opening up ourselves to this moment, this sensation. It is an act of surrender--not surrender as doormat, but surrender as working really hard to face the internal sensations and emotions and come to a place of welcome. And once we've done that, then we can make a decision about the outer situation, the event that caused the inner turmoil, because it won't have the same hold on us it had before. Once we've welcomed it, we sit with that a while until we notice it doesn't have the same hold on us that it did, and at that point, we can begin to let go of that emotion.

I haven't practiced the welcoming prayer much; in fact, the welcoming prayer is a bit scary, with its premise of opening to those things inside which I would rather not acknowledge. But recently, I did find myself using it. I noticed the other day that my heart was starting to race, in response to a particular situation I was in; I was having a physical response to the situation. So, I decided to welcome what I identified as fear. I wasn't sure if it made a difference in the moment, but later I noticed I had a more open and compassionate feeling, so I do think there was something about that practice that made a difference.

Why do I talk about the welcoming prayer as a response to loss? Because I think it has something to offer us, individually, and as a community, if we are willing to engage it.

As human beings, we know that life is full of loss and pain. We really can't avoid it. To live in constant fear of something bad happening is not to live at all. So while we are not called to welcome loss, our spiritual posture of surrender, or welcome, does help us go through life with a different posture toward loss; rather than an internal resistance to it, we pay attention to how we are responding to it. And paying attention to our losses during Lent reminds us that the path that Jesus walked was a path of letting go and surrender. His journey to the cross was a journey toward acceptance of his death, even while he mourned the necessity of this journey. His prayer in the garden is a great example of the welcoming prayer: he acknowledges his grief--"I am deeply grieved, even to death...and going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him." (Mark 14:34-35) He welcomed it: "Abba, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." (v 36) And he let it go: "the hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going." (v 41)

I was talking to a friend, the friend who first introduced me to Cynthia Bourgeault and her welcoming prayer, about having seen the musical about Harriet Tubman the other week at The Lerner Theatre. Among other things, I talked about my discomfort at the scenes when the white slave hunters captured an African girl, locked her in a cage on stage and danced and sang on the cage. During the talkback after the musical, the white actors were asked how they could do that, and the actor who locked the girl in the cage said he had to set aside his modern beliefs about race and equality, and take on the identity of his character, who in that period of time, did not see Africans as human. He said this was hard to do. The director talked about how they struggled with how to tell a difficult story honestly and accurately. As I talked about this, my friend said she thinks that putting on this musical and watching it was perhaps one way to practice the welcoming prayer-- looking at a difficult time in history, a time that set the stage for the continued racism of today, and trying to be honest about it was a way to get at some of the internal emotions that we would rather deny or ignore. But it

is only in facing something directly, that we can begin to make sense of it and find our way through it.

My spiritual director talks about walking up to the edge of our pain and touching it, as an important part of finding our way through those experiences. We can come up to the painful experiences and touch them--name them, acknowledge them, look at them. Watching Harriet Tubman: The Musical, was one way to touch the pain of racism. Here in Goshen, the resolution acknowledging that Goshen was a sundown town is another way to practice this welcoming prayer, as we get in touch with our history of racism. I believe that the naming of this history will help us also take steps to address racism in our community today. As we name the racism, look at a difficult time in history, one we'd rather not look at, we can get in touch with the losses that are associated with it--loss of dignity, loss of a sense of personal worth or value, and in extreme cases, loss of life. Acknowledging that history is a way to respond to the loss as a community.

Finally, how we respond to loss links it to this season in the church year. Colossians 1:24 says: I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. Scott Cairns, in *God for Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter*, wonders what Paul could have meant in this verse. "What could possibly be lacking from the afflictions of Christ?" Maybe, he thinks, what is lacking is our participation with Christ in his suffering. Maybe, in order to know Christ fully, we have to participate in his suffering. It is through suffering that we learn to know Christ and acquire a heart of love and compassion like Christ. (p. 83)

And there is the paradox of the Christian life: we aren't called to welcome the losses of our lives, and yet we are called to walk the path of suffering, to participate in the suffering of Christ. It is a paradox that the path of loss is the path that leads us to Christ, and that ultimately leads us to greater love and compassion for the world. As a Christian community, it is this knowledge that shapes and informs our response to loss, either our own loss or someone else's. It doesn't make us more callous, but helps us to place our sufferings with Christ and his suffering. Christ knows how hard this is. May

we trust that in all our losses and suffering, we are held by a God who knows suffering, and who loves us and will never leave us.