

A Time to Mourn
July 13, 2014
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4
Isaiah 53:4-6
Matthew 5:4

My family and I spent the last few days on our annual retreat to the tiny, inter-coastal fishing village of Bath, N.C., population 265. Each summer, we gather there at the home of a long-time, close friend and professional colleague of my late father's. My stepmother comes down from Washington, DC. It is always a time of recreation and restoration as we catch up on each other's lives. More informally than formally, part of what we do there is remember my father, who died 5 years ago. Though he is gone in body, he is present in Spirit as the center-post for our relationships with each other.

That is the way it is with meaningful losses in our lives. Nothing ever fills the hole left by the person who is gone. But the rough edges around the wound heal over in time. We mourn for whatever time is needed. Then, each in our own way, we go on in life, never forgetting the lost loved-one but finding new life in others and in the ever-new world around us.

Loss, grief and recovery are all important parts of life, inevitable and escapable. For people of faith, loss, grief and recovery are also important parts of our life with God. Faith – or at least some larger perspective on our existence, one that transcends our roughly four scores years on earth – can make all the difference as we make sense of our losses.

As I have written to you, the loss of a loved one is by far the most common experience we have shared here as a family of faith, across all of our differences and all of our diversity. Almost weekly, some member of the Caldwell family loses a member of his or her family. Sometimes the loss is expected. Sometime the relative is not close. Other times the loss comes suddenly and strikes at the very heart of our member and us.

As a church family, we have had our own direct losses. One by one, we have lost many of the senior saints who refused to close this church when it was barely hanging on. In other situations, we have lost members to sudden illness and gun violence, some young, some far too young. Yes, as a church family, we are, to use the prophet Isaiah's words, in one translation of chapter 53, "acquainted with grief."

Death is not the only cause for grief, of course. Some of us grieve the loss of friendship, the loss of our health, the loss of a job we loved, the end of a marriage or another important relationship. Many here have felt the poignant pain of losing a relationship with another congregation, for whatever reasons. Any of these kinds of losses can be as meaningful and formative as when a loved one dies.

Here at Caldwell, we intend to focus more intently on these shared experiences. Our mission statement – and our missional DNA – drives us to focus outward much of the time, to serve others in Christ’s name, to share God’s love by working toward justice, to heal the world’s wounds beyond our campus, as best we can. But we can never forget to take care of ourselves. As I have said to many of you going through loss or pain, we need to follow the instructions of what to do on an airplane in case of emergency; when the oxygen mask drops down from the ceiling, we need to put it on ourselves first to be able to care for others.

With all this in mind, our Congregational Care Committee intends to deepen our grief-related ministry. Evie and I will be, as always, focused on and available to those in various stages of grieving. Each loss brings with it a need for pastoral attention, of course, and each pastoral situation is unique.

There is, at the same time, more that we can do for each other. One of the main ideas of our Reformed tradition is that we are a “priesthood of all believers.” So, while we are not all trained in pastoral counseling, we can become more effective in simply ‘being’ with each other, attending to the things that make life even a little better for those who are grieving.

So, in the weeks to come, under the leadership of Congregational Care Committee Chair Kim Bohannon and member John Crowell, we will be looking for those who believe they are called and equipped for this sensitive but critical aspect of our life together. Stay tuned to hear more on that.

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For guidance in all of this, we can and we should, of course, look beyond the narrative of our own lives to the Holy Scripture, the narrative of God with God’s people. The scriptural narrative tells of individuals and families, faith communities and entire nations that experience seasons of loss and grief. When Jacob even thinks he has lost his son Joseph, he swears to grieve until his own death. When Moses died, his people, the nation of Israel, mourn collectively for 30 days. When King David loses a son, he is inconsolable for a time. When Jesus loses a close friend, he, quite literally, cannot stand for it and he raises his friend from the dead, saying that

his friend was just sleeping. That is not an option for the rest of us, of course. So we mourn to heal.

The book of wisdom known as Ecclesiastes affirms that mourning is part of life when it declares there is “a time to mourn and a time to dance.” In an altogether different context, Jesus says, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, that “blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

We can connect these two vastly different eras in time, these two vastly different chapters in God’s story, through this morning’s third scripture reading from the prophet Isaiah. For the Hebrew people, Isaiah 53 evokes a memory of their profound suffering in exile, about 550 years before Christ. The powerful Babylonians had captured the great Israelite capitol Jerusalem. The Israelites had been literally “run out of town,” scattering to nearby regions, leaving behind all that was familiar and affirming.

The Israelites had lost everything. Now they had years to grieve and to try to make sense of these events. Everything was suddenly unknown and uncertain, even their identity as God’s chosen people, even their faith in their God.

For God’s people, it was a time of deep introspection and self-reflection. What might have caused their lives to be turned upside down? What might be the reasons for their awful misfortune?

In fact, they asked themselves the same questions any of us might ask when we have lost someone or something important. Was there something I could have done differently to avoid all of this? Was God mad at me? Was my faith not strong enough? Is my faith strong enough to see me through this time of trial? Has God lost sight of me? Has God forgotten me? Is God punishing me? And what of my friends and family in faith? Have they forgotten me? Have they abandoned me in my time of need?

The questions go on: Am I supposed to learn something from this? Who am I in the world and in the eyes of God now that this has happened? How does this loss change my sense of identity, my place in the world, in relation to others, in relation to myself, in relation to my God?

Aren’t these some of the same questions we ask ourselves in times of loss and grieving? Aren’t these the answers we seek, sometimes even desperately, in an effort to make sense of things?

For the Hebrews then and for Jews today, this episode in the life of the Israelites bears lessons of God's trials, but also evidence of God's redemption. God did redeem the Israelites, as we know from the rest of the story in the Old Testament. God did not leave them in exile. All of this is what Isaiah is saying in chapters 52 and 53.

For Christians, however, there is added meaning. For Christians, this prophecy foretells of Christ Jesus as the one who is acquainted with our grief, who bears our infirmities and carries our diseases, who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Christ is the one by whose bruises we are healed. Christ is the one in whom God knows our personal losses and the depths of our grief.

In Christ, God shares those losses with us. In Christ, we are enfolded in God's strong arms through our time of grieving until, as Ecclesiastes says, we are ready again to dance. So, then, when Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount "blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," Jesus speaks not of a far-off promise but of a known certainty. Jesus is not declaring a future pledge but a real-time truth that is in place in Christ, who suffered as we suffer and took our suffering upon himself.

In me, Jesus tells his followers in the Sermon on the Mount, God has come into the world. In me, Jesus says, God feels every human emotion, including love and loss. In me, God fully knows our grief. In me, Jesus says, in my death and in my resurrection, there is no place, no realm of depression or disorientation, that can keep us separated from the God who is always seeking us out and always bringing us in.

Loss is thus a part of the full life we are given by God. God gives us relationships as a gift. In relationship with others, we live more fully. We realize parts of ourselves, parts of our identity that we otherwise may never fully know. In our best, closest, most cherished relationships, we feel completed and, when that person is gone we feel incomplete. We say that a hole has been left or even that part of us has died. This is all part of living, isn't it? And part of living is dying.

There are other kinds of relationships and other kinds of losses, of course. We all have relationships that are far from perfect. We all have other kinds of people in our lives. People with whom our hopes were never fully realized. People who have disappointed us. People who have let us down somehow. People who represent injury and even abuse to our souls and even our bodies.

A different kind of grieving sets in when these relationships are over or these people are gone. But in all grieving there is healing. As with any, we must deal with our emotions about these

relationships and these people in our lives. We must reconsider who we are now that they are gone, as always, children of God, loved and cherished by God but, nonetheless, new and different in some ways once these chapters in our lives are over.

Each case of loss and grieving is unique, just as each one of us is unique and each relationship in our lives is unique. There is no pat answer, no formula that dictates how long we should grieve, how we should grieve or how long it will be after the loss before we are “better.” These truths are just another reflection of how each of us, as the Psalmist says, is “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God’s hand.

When it comes to the how church and its people walk with those who are grieving, sometimes what is needed is close pastoral attention and counseling. Sometimes what is needed is just space and time for a person to heal on his or her terms. Whatever the need is, what we seek to do with our added emphasis on loss and grief here at Caldwell is be there with what is needed, as defined by the person experiencing the loss.

That may be meals for family at the time of death. Or it may be a well-timed phone call, just to check in, three or six or nine months afterward, when the reality of the loss settles in. It may be help with simple tasks that a grieving person just can’t figure out how to get done, like mowing the lawn or fixing a toilet. Or it may be just a listening ear on a regular basis, someone to hold up a mirror and let us see that we are doing OK.

Each week, we are doing these things for each other already. I see that all around this place and amidst the many relationships that connect us day to day, person to person, need to need, life to life, heart to heart. Going forward, we simply want to be more intentional about it so that we are there for each other when it counts, as a witness to God’s undying love, as the hands and feet of Christ, who bears our burdens and is well acquainted with our grief.

Through the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, God promised the fullness of life, saying there is a time to mourn and a time to grieve. In the Sermon on the Mount, God in Christ Jesus extended that promise to all, saying “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

The whole of scripture testifies that our triune God does not leave us alone in our mourning or hanging midair in our loss. God’s threefold promise, to be our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer, covers every realm of our lives. As Isaiah promises us, the one who suffers will be lifted up, exalted and restored again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.