**Coping With Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox**

**Matthew 26:36-46**

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A few weeks ago, those of us who went to the Holy Land in January had a zoom reunion.  It was fun to be together again - even if just virtually.  As we chatted, someone asked, “What do you tell people when they ask what was the best part or what was your favorite place?”  We all agreed it’s almost impossible to answer because the whole experience of traveling to the Holy Land is so meaningful.  There are so many important sites, so much history, and so many moments when the Bible suddenly comes to life.

For me, I’m almost hesitant to say that perhaps the place that touched my spirit most deeply was the Garden of Gethsemane.  The pictures that you saw while Tim was reading the scripture are among the pictures I took while we were there.  It’s a small garden, by today’s standards, closed in by a fence.  The trees are ancient, gnarly olive trees - several of which date back to when Jesus was alive.  I could easily imagine the disciples curled up in a corner somewhere under their canopy and Jesus, kneeling some distance away, praying with such sorrow and fear.

Of all the stories in the gospels, all the scenes in which we see Jesus healing, teaching, praying, or challenging others, the one in which I feel the strongest connection, the sense of Jesus in his humanness being  most like me in mine, is as he prays in Gethsemane.  This is Jesus at his most vulnerable - laying out his fears and his grief before God.

Last week, we started a sermon series called Coping with Covid: A Spiritual Toolbox.  That first sermon was about living in the uncertainty of this time - how difficult it is not to know what the future holds.  Today, we’ll continue by exploring what we might learn from Jesus about naming losses and facing grief.

We live in a culture that isn’t very good at dealing with grief - in part because we’re not very good at dealing with death.  Death and dying are almost taboo topics of conversation and so, by extension, we don’t talk about grief, either.  Instead, we try to contain it - limiting its place in our lives only to the experience of losing a loved one.  We think of grief as a very private, personal matter - and an emotion that scares us, leaving us feeling awkward and uncomfortable when forced to confront it.

And yet, what we are experiencing right now in the midst of Covid-19 is grief - its collective grief.  As a society, a nation, a world community, we have lost so much over these last couple of months.  Only some among us have experienced the greatest loss - the death of someone we love - but all of us have experienced loss, many losses.  We’ve lost our plans for special occasions - weddings, baptisms, graduations, vacations.  We’ve lost our security - jobs, income, retirement savings, even just the mundane routines that give our lives order and structure.  We’ve lost intimacy - a good laugh over a cold beer with friends, the chance to hug mom on Mother’s Day, and, for those who live alone, the chance to simply be touched.

As the pandemic continues week after week, the losses pile up around us.  One thing after another canceled, postponed, left unfinished or unresolved.  And our response to so much loss is grief.  Real grief - just as real and legitimate as the grief we feel when someone passes away.

Not only are we grieving for what we have already lost but many of us are struggling with anticipatory grief, as well.  What if I lose my job?  What if the economy doesn’t recover?  What if Covid strikes Mom’s nursing home?  What if, what if, what if?

Most of us are familiar with the five stages of grief that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross first outlined many years ago in her book On Death and Dying.   The stages, in case you need a refresher, are denial, anger, bartering, depression, and acceptance.  Over time, Kubler-Ross acknowledged that they really aren’t sequential.  In fact, you may feel any one or more of those emotions at any time when you are grieving - and then feel something else moments later.

When we read Matthew’s account of Jesus at Gethsemane, we can actually see Jesus experiencing the stages of grief and moving back and forth between them.  We see his wish to deny his future and to barter with God as he says, “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”.  We see his anger as he loses patience with the disciples “So you could not stay awake with me one hour?” There is a note of sadness as he returns three times in prayer, still holding out a bit of hope that his death is not inevitable.  And finally, we see glimpses of acceptance as he says, “See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

We identify with Jesus here because we know grief, and many of us are experiencing many of the same things right now.  In a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, David Kessler, a former student of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and now the leading expert on grief in the world, laid out what the stages of grief during Covid-19 might look like.  In fact, Laura Hayden shared this same information with our children and their families shortly before Easter, and, parents, you can find that video on the church’s YouTube channel.

In the article, Kessler says, “There’s denial, which we say a lot of early on: *This virus won’t affect us*. There’s anger: *You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities.* There’s bargaining: *Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?* There’s sadness: *I don’t know when this will end.* And finally there’s acceptance. *This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed.”*

I would guess many of us have said exactly those sentences - if not out loud, at least in our own minds and hearts.  Kessler goes on to say, “Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance.”   So, how do we get to acceptance?  Anyone who has grieved can tell you that grief has its own time table - there is no way to rush the process.  But, there are things we can do to move closer to acceptance and, again, we can see them if we pay attention to how Jesus handles his own circumstances and emotions.

The starting point is to name our losses.  Before they ever even got to Gethsemane, Jesus did this.  He spoke often to his disciples about his death - preparing them for the fact that he would soon be leaving them. He didn’t deny the truth of his situation but spoke frankly of Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial.  If you look back over the last two months, what have been your losses?  At home?  At school?  At work?  Can you name them?

Secondly, Jesus made time and space for his grief.  He went to Gethsemane - to a place that felt safe.  Though he needed to be alone to express his grief, he made sure there were people he trusted nearby. And then he allowed his feelings to rise up and to pour out in prayer.  As a culture, we are so focused on doing, achieving, and managing, but we’re not very good at giving permission to ourselves to feel or to be vulnerable.  Yet, one thing we know about grief is that it doesn’t go away if you don’t let it out.  How can you make space in your life to just feel your disappointments and your sadness without judging them?

As Jesus moves through his grief in prayer, we see him reign in his fear about the future and focus on right now - this moment, the present, today.  “The hour is at hand,” he says.  “Get up, let us be going.”  For those of us who worry, this is perhaps the greatest gift we can give ourselves.  Over and over again we hear the power of staying in the present, of focusing on now, or of embracing today.  Take time to see the beauty in the ordinary things that are around you.  Name what you are grateful for right now.  Feel the air fill your lungs.  Give thanks that right now, this day, you are not sick.  You have food and a roof.  Today, what you have is enough.

Finally, undergirding all of what Jesus says and does at Gethsemane is his trust in God - trust that life and love, goodness and compassion will prevail in the end.  Even as he stood up and walked toward an almost certain death, Jesus trusted that the arc of God’s work in the world is always toward resurrection and new life.  His death would not be the end of the story.

One way to stay focused on today and to strengthen your trust in God is through a simple breath prayer.  Breathe in God’s presence - you may include a word or phrase that centers you.  Breathe out your fears and worries.  Carole DeHart is putting together a video to lead you through breath prayer that will be available on our Facebook page.  And Carole will lead us Thursday evening on Zoom as we practice breath prayer and praying with a labyrinth.

We won’t get back what we have lost in this time.  We have every reason to grieve and we should.  Yet, as we do, we can trust that God will not leave us or our world in this place with this pandemic.  As Easter people, our God is the God of new life, of healing and starting again, of new doors open and new hope born.

May it be so.  Amen.