

Soul Tending: Letting Go

Mark 8:27-33

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One of the things I love about Mary Oliver's poetry is her ability to create word pictures out of what she observes in the natural world and then use them to share deep insights into human life. With this poem, "In Blackwater Woods", she draws these beautiful images of the last days of fall when the dying off is nearly over. The trees are bare of their leaves and cattails burst open to release their seeds out into the world. They are symbols of endings, of loss, of the inevitable rhythm of life to death to life again which is the drumbeat of all of God's creation. Then she pulls out of these images a truth, a deep truth, about how to live in a world that is constantly dying and rising again. "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, let it go."

We are two weeks into the season of Lent and two weeks into our sermon series on soul-tending - how we care for our spiritual hurts and fears to prepare ourselves for Easter. There is perhaps nothing that bruises the soul more deeply than loss and the aching grief that comes with it. So, today we look at tending the grieving soul.

Now, I'm going to be honest. While preaching about loss and grief is always challenging, this time feels especially so. As some of you know, I have lost two very important people in my own life during the last year - my father and my dear friend and spiritual companion, Juli.

But, of course, there are many other kinds of losses, as well. Right now, those of us who worship at Green Wood campus are struggling mightily right now with the impending loss of their church home. In recent months, I have heard their bewilderment, their anger, and, above all, their grief. We will need to walk alongside them through this time and welcome them warmly when the time comes. We also might experience loss through a broken relationship or a serious illness or any number of life events. In fact, some of us are still grieving losses from the pandemic.

Grief is an unavoidable reality. All of us who love will suffer the pain of loss and travel the journey of grief. We are grieving because we have loved deeply. We have experienced what Mary Oliver suggests - that what gives this life meaning is loving. That our very lives depend on our ability to love and to be loved. We know that we are mortal. We know that inevitably, the people and places and things that we love, will go away and we will have to let them go. Yet, we risk our hearts and love anyway.

Throughout the gospels, we watch the disciples struggle with this. For Peter, that journey begins in the moment captured in our scripture reading for today. This conversation between Jesus and Peter happens midway through Jesus's ministry. The disciples have been traveling with Jesus, watching as he heals the sick, listening as he teaches a gospel of love and justice. I imagine it being like the process of falling in love. Each day that passes they have become more and more

attached to him, more and more drawn into his orbit. He has become their teacher, their mentor, their savior, their hope. They don't necessarily understand everything about him or what he says, but they know he is truly special - so much so that when Jesus asks who they think he is, Peter blurts out "you are the Messiah"!

Of course, the image Peter has of a Messiah is of an anointed king who will conquer Rome and bring Israel back to its former glory. So, moments later, when Jesus starts talking about how he is going to suffer and be rejected, and then be killed and rise again three days later, Peter must have been shocked and bewildered. Not only is this not the life path of a savior king, but what Peter is hearing for the first time is that he is going to lose this one that he loves.

We know that feeling, don't we? The disorientation of that moment when you first hear the news? There are no more treatment options. There has been an accident. I'm sorry, but your job has been cut. It is a moment when time stops. When the world goes dark.

And then we react with denial or anger or bargaining. Peter tries to argue with Jesus about it. You can imagine his words. "What are you talking about, Jesus? You're not going to die! That's not what happens to the Messiah!" But Jesus is quite harsh in his response. "Get behind me, Satan. Your mind is on human things, not divine things." He will not let Peter tempt him to deny what he knows is coming.

For the whole rest of the gospel of Mark, we will see Peter struggle to accept this. He has loved Jesus wholeheartedly. How can Jesus be going to die? How can he possibly let Jesus go? He will try to stop the Roman soldiers from taking Jesus away. He will deny he even knows Jesus. Yet, eventually he will have to let him go.

And that is the journey of grief, I think. From the initial shock to the acceptance that you would never trade loving so deeply to be spared the agony of loss to finding assurance in God's promise of new life and new beginnings.

Our question, though, is how do we care for ourselves along the journey? How do we tend these bruised souls? We all grieve differently, but here are some things I've found helpful over the last year. I think first, we strive to be empathetic with ourselves. Grief does strange things to you. You burst into tears for no reason. You forget every other thought that you have. You drop things constantly. You get unreasonably angry, blow even the smallest things out of proportion.

All of this is normal, and there is no sense in being upset with yourself about it. Rather, recognize that this is part of your heart taking care of itself, learning to live into the reality of your loss. Be kind to yourself.

Secondly, make space for the grief. We live in a society that is so uncomfortable with death and, therefore, with grieving. We give people three bereavement days and expect them to be all better. And because society expects that, we expect it of ourselves. We get pulled into all

of the things that must be done, the urgency of whatever task lands before us. Yet, all this does is leave the grief unresolved, holding us hostage so we don't get to the place of thoughtful acceptance.

One way to make space is to take solace in the natural world. Mary Oliver's poem speaks to us because the rhythms of nature are deep in our bones. Take a walk in the woods in March as the first buds are beginning to show on bushes and trees though there is not yet much green to be seen. Let your soul find comfort in the interdependence of creation.

Take time to spend with God. You don't have to do anything. Just allow yourself to sit in God's presence, to breathe in God's comfort and goodness, to lean into the assurance that God is always with you. Allow your feelings to rise up and then pour them out to God in prayer.

Recognize that letting go doesn't mean forgetting the person, never crying anymore, or no longer grieving. Letting go is making room for something new.

Finally, do not think you must journey alone. Grief can be incredibly isolating. We feel as though no one understands or that no one wants to be around someone who is crying all the time. But you are surrounded by a spiritual community here, by friends who are able to sit with you with no expectations, to pray with you, to listen to your memories and offer you a Kleenex. One of the great gifts of church is that we are here for each other.

So, just as I started this sermon with a poem, I am going to end with one, as well. From the deeply-respected, African American theologian Howard Thurman...

I Share With You the Agony of Your Grief

I share with you the agony of your grief,
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.
I know I cannot enter all you feel
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;
I can but offer what my love does give: The strength of caring, the warmth of one who seeks to
understand,
The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss,
This I do in quiet ways, That on your lonely path You may not walk alone.

May it be so. Amen.