

Grief and Restoration

A Sermon on Luke 15:1-10 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Most of the time we hold our grief inside. Other people cannot see our grief. Most of the time other people cannot really understand our grief.

September 11, 2001 was different. The Pentagon and the World Trade Center were attacked by religious terrorists. Thousands of Americans and people from other nations were killed. 415 firefighters were killed as they attempted to evacuate civilians in the World Trade Center. Thirty three passengers were killed as they thwarted the terrorists' attempt to fly United flight 93 into the US Capitol, thereby saving the lives of hundreds of senators, representatives and other people at the US Capitol that day.

Our grief was, and is, collective. Some of us have relatives or friends who died on September 11th. All of us feel the loss of safety and order, the increase of anger, depression and anxiety prompted by the terrorist attacks. Every American lost something valuable on September 11th. Every American has a reason to grieve.

You also have other reasons to grieve. Each one of us is carrying some sort of deep, personal grief today. A parent, or a partner, or a child has died. Someone we love has given up on us, or given up on their own life. A partner or child or parent has broken their relationship with us. Someone we love is mired in a seemingly endless spiral of mental illness or substance abuse.

Most of us don't like to talk about the grief we are carrying. That can make things more difficult. Some of us actually like to talk about the grief we are carrying. Perversely, that can also make things more difficult for us.

So on this September 11th I'm going to ask you to try something I've never tried in a sermon before. First, consider the grief you are carrying that is heaviest for you. This might be a kind of grief you think about every day. It is more personal than the grief you carry from the terrorist attacks of 21 years ago. It might be something that most people don't know about. The heaviest grief is the one that crosses your mind every day, or almost every day.

The first step is for us to name the grief we have experienced. So I encourage you to write one or two words on the front of the yellow slip of paper in your leaflet. It could be the name of a place or the name of a person. If you are a more private sort of person you could just write two or three letters, something no one else will understand if they happen to see this little slip of paper. No matter how you choose to put it in writing I encourage you to make your grief more concrete by writing it down on paper.

As we hold these little slips of paper in the palms of our hands we remember that we are following the one we call the Lord of love. In his life and teaching he invited every person to live in the way of God's hope, that is why there were always throngs of people following him around. Jesus preached a message of hope and restoration.

Alongside the grief you are carrying, each one of us is holding onto some sort of hope that a relationship will come back to life, that our loved one will recover, or that we will not be so alone in the world. The hope that you carry might seem to be faint and weak. You might feel the situation is almost hopeless. This is not something to be concerned about. This thing we call 'hope' has no fear of times and situations that appear to be hopeless.

Hope is different from expectation. The kind of hope that Jeremiah, Isaiah and St. Paul talk about is actually the opposite of expectation. St. Paul reminds us that “Hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what is seen?”

Each one of us is holding onto some sort of hope that our grief will come to an end, that the relationship will be made whole, that we will be healthy and whole. This hope is, by its very nature, faint. It is like a match burning in the darkness for a few seconds. Do not be discouraged by the faintness of the light. Do not be discouraged that you feel the warmth of its light for just a few, fleeting seconds. The hope deep inside you is a gift from God.

Jesus tells two parables of hope in our Gospel passage. In the first parable a shepherd has a flock of one hundred sheep. One of the sheep is lost. The shepherd does not say, “That’s no problem. I still have ninety nine sheep left.” No, the shepherd goes out in search of the lost sheep, until he finds it and brings it back into the fold.

You and I can do the same. If we live in hope we will not deceive ourselves by saying, “I don’t care about this loss anymore.” We will not say, “I don’t care that my brother hasn’t spoken to me in ten years, because I have nine other brothers. I always liked them better anyway.” If we have hope we will not stop caring. Sometimes we deceive ourselves by pretending the grief is very small. Sometimes we give up. Jesus encourages us to not give up.

In the second parable Jesus tells a story about a woman who has ten silver coins. As far as we can tell this is all of the money the woman possesses. The woman loses one of her coins. The woman does not sit on the floor of her house, weeping. She does not run into the street wailing, or accuse one of her neighbors of stealing the coin. Instead, she gets to work. She does not know if she will find the coin. She does not know where she might find the coin, but she begins her search.

You and I can do the same. If we live in hope we will not respond to our losses by accusing other people or by spending our days weeping and wailing. If we live in hope we respond to our losses by being engaged in the work of restoration, like the woman in the parable.

For you, the work of restoration is going to be more complicated than sweeping the floor. The woman in the parable lost a silver coin. You have lost something that is much more valuable than a silver coin.

Restoration has three parts. All three parts are in the two parables we heard today. You have already taken the first step which is to admit you have lost something. The second part of restoration requires some sort of repentance from us. Repentance might not be your favorite word. It might help to use a slightly different word: return.

I encourage you to return to the one who created you out of love, for the purposes of love. Returning to God is mostly a way of being, not a list of things to do. Returning to God is a way of being more fully yourself, the self God created in the image of God. We return to God by turning away from actions and words that harm ourselves and other people. This is the second step in restoration.

Jesus invites us to follow him on a journey of restoration and wholeness. The third part of the path is alluded to in the story of the woman who lost the silver coin.

The woman rejoiced when she found the lost coin. You and I, after we have acknowledged our losses and repented of the mistakes we have made, should also be engaging in activities that bring us joy. In the story, the woman had a party with her friends after she found the lost coin. I’m going to

suggest that the thing you have lost is much more valuable than a silver coin. It will not work for you to defer the activities that bring joy to your life until later.

Love is a gift from God. Hope is a gift from God. Joy is also a gift from God. The activities and people and places that bring joy to our lives bring us closer to God. So this third part of the spiritual path of restoration and recovery requires us to engage in those parts of life that create joy.

The artists must be painting or working with clay. The writers must devote themselves to writing. The cooks must be in the kitchen. The singers must be singing. The people who find joy in investigating and learning must do those things.

So I ask you to reflect on what brings more joy to your life. I hope you have some sort of list or collection of things that bring joy to your life. Please write down one of those things that brings most joy to you on the back side of that little slip of paper.

There is a relationship between the grief you named on the front side, and the place or activity of joy you are naming on the back side of this little slip of paper. In the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep Jesus encourages us to acknowledge our losses, and then to move beyond them to a place of joy. This is a path of restoration and wholeness.

So on this September 11th I encourage you to join with me in a brief liturgy of reflection and prayer. We have rearranged our liturgy just a bit to create a time and space for each of us to come forward, leave that little slip of paper in one of the offering plates at the front, light a candle, and say a prayer. Your prayer might be for a person or for a broken relationship. Your prayer might be for yourself or a problem seen all around the world. Your prayer might be a thanksgiving for the joyful activity that sustains you.

In this brief liturgy, we are giving up some of our grief. We are seeking to walk beside the Lord of love.

Closing Prayer:

God of the resurrection, we offer our griefs and joys to you. Kindle the hope you have placed in the center of our lives, that we may know your joy. We pray to walk beside you, that your love would be our strength.