

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 13, 2020, The 15th Sunday of Pentecost / The 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 30:1-5, 8-12 (The Message), John 11: 1-7, 17-44

GRIEVING TOGETHER IN A WORLD PANDEMIC, PART TWO**“FIRST WE GRIEVE, THEN WE HOPE”**

I grew up in a family that didn't believe in having funerals, on my father's side of the family. So, when my Grandma Jen died in the spring of my senior year of college, I got a phone call telling me the news on the dorm telephone. Because long distance calls were expensive back in the old days, it wasn't a long conversation and that was that. I let myself feel sad for part of the evening and then went back to my studies.

Let me begin by telling you what you already know about me. I believe funerals and memorial services are an important part of saying goodbye. I also believe it is important to name and feel the variety of griefs that are part of being human. But I had to learn how to grieve, because it wasn't not part of the restricted range of emotions in my family of origin.

Thankfully while I was in seminary, I spent time working with a wise therapist who helped me learn about grief. Part of that learning was reading a really helpful book called "All Our Losses, All our Griefs." That book helped me learn that grief happens with big and small losses in our lives, not just when we experience the death of someone we love.

The other part of learning about grief was creating a plan to really say goodbye to my Grandma Jen and feel the grief of no longer having her in my life. While I was back in the Pacific Northwest, after my first year of seminary I went to the Oregon coast beach where her ashes had been scattered. I took a trusted friend with me and we built a fire on the beach at sunset. I had written a goodbye letter to my Grandma Jen, naming my love for her, the lessons she had taught me and the things I missed about her. I read the letter out loud through racking sobs and then burned the letter in the fire, adding its ashes to my grandmother's ashes that had been scattered there 4 years before.

Even though it had been four years, the pain I felt at losing my grandmother was as raw and real as if it had just happened. I learned first-hand that night that when we don't feel grief as we are experiencing it, it lies dormant and buried within us until it can be released, in healthy or unhealthy ways.

This is the learning I bring to last week's sermon, and this week's sermon on grieving during this world pandemic. Life as we know it has changed. For some of us it has changed because we've lost someone we love to Covid19. For others of us, we are watching a loved one live with long-term effects from the virus. For some of us our work has changed or disappeared because of the pandemic. For many of us, the fear of the virus is very real.

For all of us the "normal" ways we lived our lives are no longer normal. We worship from a distance, many of us only see loved ones on Zoom or Facetime, and regular celebrations have been postponed or cancelled.

I am sad that this year we didn't get to honor our graduates in person. Our confirmation class is in a holding pattern, and today our youth group will meet for the first time by Zoom.

As I said last week, there is an undercurrent of grief that is flavoring our days. We don't know how long it will be until we can begin to look back, and tell the stories of what it was like for us and our loved ones, to live through these days. We are in the middle of it. It will not always be like this, but for now, this is our reality.

So, it is important for us, here in the midst of these days, to take a look at the grief and anxiety and uncertainty we are facing and feeling.

It is important for us to name it with people who can support us.

It is important for us to feel it now, as best we can.

If we bury all the feelings of this season now,
those feelings will be waiting for us in the future.

Last week I told you about an article I'd read entitled: "That Discomfort You're Feeling is Grief." The author interviewed an authority on grief, David Kessler, who reviewed Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief. It is helpful to remember that these stages of grief don't always happen in a linear fashion, one after the other. All of us grieve differently, and often move between these stages of grief.

It's also helpful to remember that the stages of grief aren't only related to our grief when someone dies, but when we experience losses like we have over these past months.

What is helpful in reviewing the five stages of grief is it can help normalize what we are experiencing during our 6th month of the world pandemic:

There's the stage of denial, denying that a loss is real or is happening. This stage may have been experienced more back in March when we thought the virus wouldn't affect us, before we went into shut down and isolation.

There's the stage of anger. Anger at changes we've made in our lives, some we've chosen, some we haven't. Anger about what we are missing out on, month by month.

There's the stage of bargaining with ourselves, or with God. For instance: "If I keep this mask on for just one more month it will be over, right?"

There is stage of sadness. Sadness because we don't see an end in sight, sadness because of all that has changed in our lives, sadness about what or who we've lost.

And finally, there is the stage of acceptance. Kessler says it is in acceptance of the current pandemic that we have power and can find some control. He gives the example that with acceptance we can say: "I can wash my hands; I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually," and I'd add: we can learn how to worship and have fellowship virtually.

Berinato, Scott, "That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief," March 23, 2020, Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

As we pay attention to how we move in and out of these stages of grief during these days of the world pandemic, it is important for me to say that:

People of faith grieve. People of faith are sad. People of faith are uncertain about the future.

There are misguided people that have said that in seasons as upsetting as a world pandemic, or the loss of loved one, "Christians shouldn't be sad, or scared, or uncertain."

It is one of the great lies pushed onto people of faith, often by other often well-intentioned people of faith, that Christians should only feel certain ways.

These lies often start with the words:

"If only you had enough faith you wouldn't feel that way...."

Or, "if only you really believed in God" you wouldn't feel sad, or scared, or uncertain.

I want to stop that lie here and now. We are all human beings, created to feel the full range of God-given emotions. It is because we have faith in our God of love that we can let ourselves feel the grief and sadness and uncertainty of these days.

As people of faith we are invited to care for ourselves and others by making room for the full range of emotions that these days bring.

The stories of the Bible show us over and over again that God's people feel and name all their

emotions. In a quick read through the Psalms you will find the heights of joy, deep anger, and the depths of despair. Nothing is held back from God.

See: Jackson, Donna Frischknecht, "First We Grieve, Then We Hope," *Presbyterians Today*, July/August 2020, Louisville: PCUSA, pp. 18-22, quote p. 20.3. 5

One of the gifts of the story of the raising of Lazarus from death to life is found in John 11:35 which says: "Jesus began to weep." Jesus, our teacher for living the life of faith, looked at Mary and Martha weeping, he looked at the people of Bethany and Jerusalem who had gathered to mourn Lazarus weeping, and Jesus joined them in their grief by weeping with them. Jesus, even knowing that he was going to raise Lazarus from death, stopped and honored the grief of people he loved.

Jesus wept, and in his weeping, he invites us to experience our own grief in these days.

Another gift in the story of Lazarus is its reminder that God is moving and breathing through even the most desperate of times. We are not alone in our grief; God, in Christ, shares our grief with us.

In last month's *Presbyterians Today* magazine there was an article entitled: "First We Grieve, Then We Hope." The article encourages us to not rush through this season of grief, but to name it for what it is, and let ourselves feel our many layers of grief. The hope comes when we let ourselves learn from our grief by walking through it.

The author quotes Donna Miller, who is the Associate for the Presbyterian Church's Mental Health Ministry. She calls on us, in Presbyterian churches, "to treat one another with compassion and grace, which means letting go of trying to get things right."

"We are bound to make mistakes, get things wrong along the way. We cannot expect perfection from ourselves or anyone else—ever, but especially now," said Miller.

She encourages us to remember that everyone grieves differently. We are all coming through this season of the world pandemic with our own stories, our own experiences. She calls us to be understanding and non-judgmental with each other.

I appreciate her reminder that we, in the church, are called to pay attention and care for each other so that no one is "left behind alone with their loss and grief."

She sees us being able to step forward into our changed world after this pandemic, if we make the time now to grieve and mourn "all our losses and all our griefs" of these days.

Jackson, *Ibid*, p. 21-22

This summer there was an article published by the World Mission arm of our Presbyterian Church. The author and her husband lived and taught in South Sudan during the most recent civil war. She writes of the trauma of teaching students about peacemaking, while at the same time having a go-bag for herself, her husband and their two children, in case fighting erupted in their village and they needed to flee into the woods that surrounded their school.

By 2017 she and her husband were teaching in refugee camps in Uganda, with those who had also fled from South Sudan when the fighting reached their villages. She writes that she learned in time, that trauma and grief cut across experiences. She found that she could no longer say that her student's experiences were so much worse than her own, so she couldn't complain. She learned the importance of sharing and listening deeply to each other's stories.

She writes that even though her experiences were less dramatic than her students there in their refugee camp,

they appreciated her vulnerability as she shared and they never made her feel judged, only heard.

She writes that this season of a world pandemic invites us as a nation and as a global

community to learn more about trauma, grief and healing. She writes: “God designed our bodies with the need to express and process loss. If we keep it locked inside, it hurts us and often our relationships with others. Helping each other grieve well is a transformative ministry.”

She then names our current losses of loved ones, loss of jobs, and the loss of a sense of security. She names the losses of events we’ve missed because of the pandemic: prom, graduation, sports, annual family gatherings, weddings rescheduled, new babies born that we haven’t been able to meet.

Some of these losses are traumatic, and some are not, but they all need to be grieved.

She invites us in the family of faith, to find good listeners and to be good listeners for each other, now and in the days ahead. She cautions us to be listeners and to find listeners who can listen “without the need to fix your problem, to give advice, or to diminish your struggle through comparison. She also cautions, “Avoid calling upon friends who feel Christians should never be sad, a sentiment that is not consistent with the breadth of Scriptures”

She says: “Find someone who makes you feel safe, heard, and understood.”
 “Sometimes we need a friend, and sometimes we need professional counselors (or a pastor) to walk with us through all that we are experiencing, feeling and grieving in these days.”

Smith-Mather, Nancy, June 8 2020, World Mission, “Finding A New Normal During A Global Pandemic,”
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/finding-a-new-normal-during-a-global-pandemic/>

My friend Judy from Duluth is one of these listeners in my life. And I’m a listener for her. Last Saturday we had a planned phone call. She didn’t get a word in edge-wise for the first 10 minutes. Instead she got hit with a barrage of all that I have been feeling and experiencing as a person, and a pastor, in the two weeks since we had last talked. I laughed, I cried, I fumed, I raged, and she just listened, until the barrage ran down.

Her first words to me were: “So, do you want me to offer some suggested strategies, or do you just need me to listen?”

“No fixing,” I answered, “Just listen.”

What a gift that she didn’t try to fix what I was feeling, or fix what I was doing, and was willing to just let me feel what I was feeling, and grieve what I was grieving.

We are in a season of change. We are in a season of grief.
 We are people created by our God to feel the full range of emotions, just as we watched Jesus do when he lived on earth.

We are moving in and out of a variety of griefs.

We need each other in the family of faith,

we need to be companions with each other and with our world on this journey.

The hope in the midst of our grief is that Jesus, who we see weeping for Lazarus, walks with us on this world pandemic journey.

The hope in the midst of our grief is that we are followers of Jesus who walked from death and the empty tomb, to new life for you, and for me and for our world. Amen.