

## *Will anger open you up or close you down?*

*John 19: 1-16a*

In the United Church of Canada, and in many, many other Christian denominations, we follow what are called lectionaries. It is usually created by a group of different people who sit down and over a long period of time come up with a schedule for what readings we are going to read and when. The good news with this is that you don't hear Karen and I go on and on about our favorite two pieces of scripture. We actually have to branch out. The challenge of it is that each year during this time of Lent we are given different parts of different Gospels to explore. Traditionally, all of the stories we have heard this Lent, over the last five weeks, would have been saved very carefully for Holy Week. They are the story that goes from Jesus entering into Jerusalem, his final time, all the way to today's reading, Jesus being officially sentenced to death.

So it was hard when we as a worship team came and sat with these readings to ponder not only what will we do throughout Lent, but how will Lent be different than Holy Week? And so what we chose to do was take Lent and put it aside and ponder how we are like Jesus and the disciples: whenever we are in trouble we have the same emotions and the same reactions that they had. During Holy Week, we will focus much more on what Jesus himself was going through, but over the last few weeks we have been pondering what does it mean to grieve? What does it mean when we are given bad news either that we are going to die sooner than we had hoped or that someone we love is going to? How does it feel to grieve when there is a shocking death which is different from the kind of death that comes after months of being in a cancer ward.

Grief gives us both good and bad news. The good news is that you are not alone in all of the different feeling that this brings up. Whether you have lost a job or a loved one you will experience different emotions and as much as you may feel like you are actually losing your stability or sanity, you actually are feeling very normal feelings. A wonderful saying I always pull out for myself as well as others is: you are responding normally to an abnormal situation. Not that grief is abnormal in that it doesn't happen often, but it always happens differently depending on what has been lost or who, or how they have been lost and how long you've

known them. What age were they? What stage in their faith were they? All of these impact the grief.

And so we have spoken of the need to weep to let go of the tears that come with depression and sadness. We spent a morning moving around the sanctuary doing different kinds of rituals and doing them in community to remember that one of the crucial pieces of grief is to not isolate ourselves, but to stay connected. We spoke about the different routines we need to get back into, to awaken ourselves from the numbness that can come with grief, and we have also spoken about denial and the need for our brain and our heart to work through the bargaining and denial that is normal and natural.

So I find myself here today speaking again about anger and I believe I was here about eight weeks ago speaking about anger, which makes me wonder about what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach *me* as well as what I need to name for you today. Anger is a part of grief, and again, depending on the grief we are working through it can come with different faces and for different reasons.

Now you may say: wait a second, you said that Jesus and the disciples felt this; all these things. When was it that we saw Jesus angry or bargaining or denying? Well, that would be when Jesus went into the temple and realized they were not getting his message about love and began to trash the place: literally.

The bargaining is one of my favorite pieces of scripture, when God says to Jesus, “it is time,” and Jesus says “oh yeah I know, but you know if you don’t want me to drink that glass of wine I won’t. I mean if you did just want to, you know...you still do want me to do that? Okay.” It’s a holy moment of prayer in Gethsemane when he says to God, “can we do this any other way, please?”

Jesus also knew that rituals and connections were going to be important throughout his and his disciples lives and so, on the night he is going to be arrested, he actually helps them create one. He takes an old ritual, the Passover meal, and transforms it into something his followers can take with them to give them comfort and community in the days to come.

John’s gospel is difficult. One of the reasons John’s gospel is difficult is that John, the name we give the writer of “John,” lived at a time when there was great conflict between the Jewish people and the Christian people. Many of the Christians had been Jews their whole life and then they found Jesus and found that following Jesus was just an expansion of their faith. Others had had no real religious affiliation at all and had found Jesus, so they knew they weren’t Jewish, but they also knew that they were going to take on some of those rituals and things. But which ones? Because of this debate John sets up a false dichotomy between what Pilate wants and what the Jewish authorities want.

In most translations the Jewish authorities are called “the Jews,” as if an entire nation had gotten together and made a committee motion about how they were all going to feel about something. If that community is anything like our community they all have different opinions about what to do and how to do it! But the small group of Jerusalem temple elders were sure Jesus was disrupting the rituals, their identities and the roles of an old, ancient religion and he had to go. Luckily he had said something that was very sacrilegious (he had said, I am the son of God). And so the elders said, excellent that means we can get rid of you, *oh but let's get the Romans to do it.*

There is another side to this story. The Romans were in charge of a part of the world that they were using to get monies from (but were otherwise ignoring). Pilate's job was to command an army that ensured that everything was quiet and calm. They found that the Jewish religion was very helpful on this front; the temple elders had great authority and could ensure that everyone did what they were supposed to do. With everyone doing what they are supposed to do Pilate looked like a very successful ruler. His supervisor could ask how are things? And he would say, “it's all quiet on the streets.” So when someone, really he was a nobody, starts having parades in the streets, starts having people question their religious beliefs, starts questioning inequality: well, we have to shut that down, now. And so Pilate informs his soldiers, we will shut down this Jesus movement: arrest and destroy. *But let us blame the Jewish people.*

The majority of the disciples run for the hills, and a few others sneak in, pretending that they are not actually followers of Jesus, trying to stay close to what might happen. And what happens is exactly what happens to all treasonous prisoners in the Roman system. You are arrested, you are flogged, you are humiliated in public and you are publicly executed. All of this to show don't mess with the empire. Obey and be quiet.

For us, either way we look at it (that this was a plot among some Jewish leaders or this was Pilate taking care of his own back yard) we see them blame each other. We see them say, well this is a really hard decision so I'm going to get you to make it. And they do what we call scapegoating. Putting onto another what we ourselves are guilty of.

Anger and grief takes a lot of different forms. Sometimes it's quite short. It's a week of sitting with the ‘Why me?’ that then moves into depression and acceptance as we go. But there is also great anger needing much longer periods of time when a death is not predicted, comes out of violence and crime, happens to anyone under our age, and our age (maybe like me you can remember the first time someone your age died; I was in grade 12, and I thought, No, no, no, no, no, no. This must not happen this is not part of the story). In particular, this happens when parents/guardians lose children. Again, it goes against the story, and it is unfair.

Now many people have heard, probably even in a Christian church, that you should just get over your anger, just accept. It's not my experience. In my experience when a death has occurred that is unfair, we must feel angry. We must feel angry; either because an injustice has happened and

as we have spoken of before anger gives us the energy to make right things that are not right. Anger at injustice has founded organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (M.A.D.D.), has changed laws, like Mr. McCann who's still in Ottawa pushing for the change of laws. And while I know she led out of love and many other emotions, I am sure Terry Fox's mother's gumption to continue his work had some "how dare you cancer", in it.

Anger is a gift from God, and like all of our emotions, needs to be expressed in safe ways, named in safe community, added to the rituals around death and grief. This is the reason why whenever possible I try to ask the family (and this only really works in the country) to dig the grave, because there is something about throwing dirt around and straining our muscles that helps us release the negative parts of the anger and helps us keep the values at our core.

Like all aspects of grief, if we get stuck in any of them, we begin to see the negative aspects of this gift. We spoke of numbness last week. That if we don't move on from numbness we no longer are living, loving. And with anger, if we do not process it and keep it moving we cannot come out to the other side with the lessons we've learned, by being the people we can be because we have known this one we loved so much.

What do we do as a community when others around us are grieving? It depends what you are most comfortable with. I would rather sit with someone who needed to cry for 3 days than someone who was in the anger stages. Why? Because of my story; my personal story, which has very little experience with anger, and so I flail a bit and I don't know what to do. And of course I work in a staff team at my church, so now I do know what to do; I call in a colleague. At times, that colleague calls me when the weeping keeps going. So it is okay for you, as a friend, to say to someone, I need you to get help during this part of your grief. And when you need to bring out the tissue and watch sappy movies and just cry, please call me. That I can do. So know yourself, know what your gifts are when you are in relationship with others.

And know too, and tell everyone you can find, all of the emotional roller coaster of grief is horrible, necessary, and sacred. Thanks be to our God, who is with us through it all.

Amen.