

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2022

Last week I mentioned my friend Gavin in my sermon. It was a passing illustration that used race and our friendship – Gavin is a black man; I'm obviously exceedingly white – as an example of celebrating our differences rather than trying to boil each of us down to how we are all the same down deep. I almost cut that illustration from the sermon Sunday morning because last Saturday night, Gavin called – deep in tears and grief – because he had just learned that his childhood best friend, Anthony Nsemo, died in a car accident that evening. I almost cut that brief paragraph in last week's sermon because it felt – to me alone, of course; you all knew nothing of this – because it felt inauthentic to mention Gavin without immediately raising up this saddest of prayer requests on his behalf.

I was faced with a challenge – omit the illustration, preach it like I did (that is, with no reference to this tragic loss of a 30-year-old young man), or try to explain all of this to you in the moment and, more or less, completely derail the flow of that sermon. Well, you were here, so you know that I opted to preach it with no reference to that loss. Over the last week, though, I've thought a lot about that decision. I worried that I was being crass or impious, but what I've realized is that the grief of that loss was just too new to me – I, too, knew Nsemo and liked him very much, so I too was saddened at the news of his young death – and because the grief was too new, I knew I didn't have words for it.

I share this story because today we are beginning a new, three-week sermon series on "Transitions." That we're focusing on transitions is not a surprise given how deep we are, as a community, in this season of transition. In fact, this series wasn't even my idea. The idea for this series belongs to the "Transition Team" that's been walking with me during my first months on this job.

That we have something called a "Transition Team" is pretty good evidence that we're in a transitional season.

Now, there's a lot to be said for transitions, but if I could break the whole complicated mess of this topic down to some essential points or markers it would be the next three weeks – one, learning to live with loss, two, experiencing anxiety, and three, forging a faithful future together. Today, then, we will focus on loss... and the hope that springs eternal in the face of it. And while I'm going to use death as a primary example of loss and transition, I want to be clear that *any* transition involves loss. Death is probably the most extreme, but right now there are thousands of college students who are living their own transitional season – especially the freshman – and each of their transitions are also full of losses – the loss of the stability of their home life, the loss of friends from high school who are at other universities or colleges, the loss of their interdependence on their parents as they are now fully independent in being responsible for their own actions. And while I doubt the average freshman would name all these things as losses – the bravado of youth is its own sort of blessing, of course – the experience of loss remains even if it isn't the first language chosen for it. Indeed, it is my hope that maybe supplying this sort of language can be helpful to those in transition.

So, first things first, all transitions necessarily include a loss. But the loss is often compounded by other losses – specifically the loss of language to describe the loss itself. My own story is a good example of this. I stand in a pulpit every Sunday and so I've become – if I may say so myself – fairly adept at putting language to life. It's part of the job. Yet the moment I realized I was mentioning Gavin and then there was this sudden death in his life and I didn't know how to say it all rightly, well,

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2022

that's an example of that loss of language. And this is where our Psalm this morning is so helpful.

Within the Psalter, you will find every type of hymn and poem imaginable. "Psalm" may be a genre, but it is a genre with scores of subgenres attached to it. And one of the most potent of those is that of the lament. Any number of Psalms are Psalms of lament; psalms that give us language to describe loss even when our own tongues cleave to the roofs of our mouths. When we are so stricken with grief that we know not what to say, these songs of sadness step in and speak for us; they give us words to help fill the soul-crushing silence that is often the wake of loss.

What, then, do we learn from Psalm 137? In it, we see how remembering is important, how tears are necessary, and how calloused others can be with our losses. But we also see a commitment to God's presence in the midst of the loss. In their grief, these exiled Israelites don't even trust their own memory, but instead call upon God to remember for them. "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall." Through both grief and natural, human frailty, there is the concern that that which ought to be remembered will be forgotten. But not with God. God will remember. God will hold that function for us in our loss. God is good, even and maybe especially, in the traumatic moments of life. And this Psalm of lament guides us, again, when our own memories falter and our own words fail. It's part of the reason why our Jewish forebears canonized these words for us; gifted them to us.

And thank God for this because Gavin is not only mourning the loss of his friend, Nsemo. Nsemo is just the most recent in a long line of losses for my friend Gavin. In March of 2019 Gavin's mother died after a long battle with cancer. Then, suddenly and tragically, his younger sister

died in November of that same year. Now, less than three years after that loss, Gavin is facing the loss of a friend. Oh, and did I mention that Sunday was Gavin's 31st birthday? Yeah, he was supposed to be celebrating that weekend, but was instead found mourning (and suffering from COVID to boot!). Gavin is stepping into his pulpit this morning with little to hold onto than a tradition that includes Psalms of lament, but I know he'll be fine because that is enough.

Of course, we should also note how earthy, gritty, and real both of our readings are when they come to the topic of loss. There is no virtuous mourner in these readings – you know, the idealized person who can shed one, lone, meaningful tear and then move on with their processing. No, both of these readings demonstrate that loss includes some rather negative expressions too. Just look how that Psalm ends: "Happy shall they be who take [Babylon's] little ones and dash them against the rock!" Holy yikes! This piece of sacred scripture also includes the rage of infanticide! And Naomi is not much better. After the loss of her husband and both of her sons, she does what so many of us try to do; she tries to logistically manage the grief. She starts making plans for her now-widowed daughters-in-law, insisting that they return to their families, for they have no more family with her.

I suppose that logistically trying to manage grief is inevitable, but it is also rarely the best plan. And, I mean, who can blame her? No one in her condition would be thinking with their best mind, right? And, for what it is worth, I'm not sure Ruth – having just lost her husband – is in any better of a headspace. So, basically, there's a bunch of likely bad plans be bantered about. The point, then, that we should take from this story is that in the face of grief, our good God who loves us deeply, isn't going to fail us, even in our dumbest of plans. No,

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2022

our good God is good enough to work with the scraps of our soul that we have to offer God.

Significantly, later in the Book of Ruth, we will learn that Naomi has renamed herself. She is no longer Naomi, but “Mara,” which means “bitter.” She knows the state of her soul and names it accordingly. And yet even this scrap of her soul is enough for our good God. God accepts “Mara/bitter” and loves her anyway. Loves her into a brighter future, even if she must patiently await it.

I love that our two readings end us in places like violent rage and bitterness – not because such violence and bitterness is holy, but because they are what they are and, more so, because it is enough for our God. One of the first lessons of developing both spiritual and emotional maturity is learning to accept whatever feelings we’re feeling – even, apparently, the fantasy of infanticide. (And, to be clear, that Psalm of lament is but fantasy, for how can those who are in chains threaten anyone, right? All they have are their frightening fantasies of the worst they can imagine, while remaining the face of enslaved hardship).

So, even these presumably negative emotions – full of unvirtuous instincts like violence and bitterness – are to be embraced for what they are: feelings. They are not, we should be clear, actions just yet. They are occasions of the soul in this moment. Naturally, if left unchecked, such occasions can become dispositions and dispositions can blossom into actions – and those actions would be wrong – but the emotions, the feelings themselves are to be accepted without value judgment.

And this is our next lesson about loss. First is to borrow language when we don’t feel like we have it in ourselves. The second is to embrace feelings without passing a value judgment on them. In the course of a transition, when recognizing the reality of all that’s been lost, it’s okay to

have lots and lots of different feelings. Really, it is okay. It’s okay if a part of you feels disappointment that the person in this pulpit isn’t Pastor David or isn’t Pastors Gary and Mary Jane. I’m not threatened by that because I understand that this is a transitional season and such feelings are natural in such a season. And, indeed, it might not even be about David or Gary or Mary Jane, but what they represented – known entities, stability, anticipated patterns, security. I want you to know, it is okay to feel that way. I understand. Heck, I get it! I met David. He is great! And his absence can include your feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, and bitterness.

Of course, those aren’t feelings we like to dwell in, so I want to conclude by suggesting yet one more option for us to consider. When Gavin called me late Saturday, I was nervous and scared even before I answered. You see, the last two times Gavin called me that late, was when his mother and then his sister had passed. Like Pavlov’s dog, I had an instinctual reaction to seeing his name pop up on my phone at that hour. And while I didn’t have many good words for him that night, the next night when I called to check in, we were both in a place to consider a most radical idea: The risen Lord has open wounds.

I mentioned this briefly in May during my candidating sermon here, but the story of Doubting Thomas includes Thomas encountering Jesus *after* Jesus’ resurrection. Our theology would hold that Jesus’ resurrected body is also His fully glorified body – the one that we also affirm “sits at the righthand of God the Father Almighty.” And yet even in this fully glorified body, we find open wounds – not scabs, not scars – open wounds. Thomas is able to probe those wounds with his finger; you may remember from the story. And this event is a sign to us that our God isn’t just good enough to serve

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2022

as a bridge from grief to no-grief, but that the full holiness of God can be present even in open wounds.

Consider that, then, for yourself. That's what I said to Gavin. Consider that this moment of grief is not your exile from God's holiness, but is the current location of it. That is, like I said, a radical idea. For we talk of a "good" God and therefore expect that God only shows up in the good places, the happy spaces. But that doesn't describe love, does it? That describes a fair-weather friend, which is really no friend at all! The hope, then, that we have in the face of loss – when silence, anger, and bitterness are all around us and all that fills us – is that God is present in the very loss itself. So understood, then, our tears become but a reminder of our baptism and our silence may be born not only of pain, but of reverence.

The Church has long held that there are "thin spaces" where the chasm between heaven and earth are reduced or made non-existence. The very person of Jesus Christ is the ultimate "thin space" since He is – as we confess – both fully God and fully human. But there are others too. This communion Table, for example and to which we will come shortly, is another "thin space." The communion we experience here is not only with our God and one another, but with every saint – with every passed loved one, with Gavin's mom, and sister, and friend. And to this, then, I add the grief of our losses. That grief is also a "thin space" between heaven and earth precisely because we worship a God whose glorified body has open wounds. Those wounds are sacred; your wounds, your losses, can be too.

In the name of the Father, and of the wounded-and-risen Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.