

Grief and Ministry

King of Glory Lutheran Church
6th Sunday of Easter: Year A: John 14:15-21
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry
May 16-17, 2020

We the church are in grief. We might not want to admit it, but we are. The Holy Spirit is our comforter in these days. We are not orphaned, but being saved in this time of trial. God invites us to learn from our suffering to be church in new ways.

John 14:15-21 - Gospel

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.
¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

These last two months have found our country, our communities, our church, and ourselves grieving. Like it or not, this virus has left us reeling from its deadly grasp. Now we as individuals might not be feeling intense grief like we would when a loved one dies, many people are. Yet the multiple losses of daily life being upended have left us all feeling some form of grief.

Today we hear Jesus telling the disciples that after He has physically left the earth, they wouldn't be abandoned. God would send the Holy Spirit to stay with them forever. In the Bible version we use, Jesus says, “The Father will give you another Advocate.” This is the Spirit who will talk to God on our behalf. Now advocate is an excellent word. Who doesn't need an advocate when we go to a doctor, or get a DUI, or land in hot water with one of the parents? We all can use an advocate – especially a divine one!

But if we go back to the King James Version, yes, the mighty King James, we find the word we need so desperately this day. Comforter. Comforter. In that translation of this text, Jesus says, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter.” And again, instead of “I will not leave you orphaned,” the King James reads, “I will not leave you comfortless.”

Comforter is an accurate translation of the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the third person of the Trinity is a comforter; coming alongside of us in our grief and pain. The Comforter whispers in our ears promises of God's unending presence. God's mercy. God's understanding of suffering and pain.

What comfort O we need, from the Holy Spirit for our deep sorrows. A mother's daughter was believed to have Covid 19. The mother desperately wanted to go be by her side, but stayed home in light of the dreaded virus. Later it was found the daughter didn't have Covid. She had late stage cancer with only weeks to live. The mother got in her car to drive as quickly as possible across state lines only to arrive moments after her beloved daughter had died. "How am I supposed to grieve when we cannot even have a funeral?" she said after watching her daughter's body being loaded into the back of the hearse. "How am I supposed to grieve?"

That heartbreaking story has played over and over again in hospital rooms, nursing homes, hospice centers all across this country. As of today, 84,133 Americans, our fellow brothers and sisters, have died from Covid 19. Over 84,000 people. Come Holy Spirit, be our comfort.

Even if we've escaped the pain of the death of a loved one, we're still grieving. All of us, individually and corporately are grieving right now. Caught yourself being overwhelmed? Find yourself getting frustrated or angry? Are you bargaining with God or family members? How about denying that the pandemic isn't as tragic as it is? Overwhelmed. Anger. Bargaining. Denial. Those are signs of grief.

What are you grieving? The losses are little and large. Missed opportunities to celebrate a graduation. Birthday parties held out in the street with everyone wearing masks. You couldn't see Mom on Mother's Day. The inability to gather for worship. Grief has found us and is making its mark. Like the virus itself, grief doesn't discriminate.

Even though it doesn't discriminate, certainly grief doesn't have an equal distribution these days. Being frustrated in not getting a hair-cut or the inability to buy Clorox wipes, isn't on par with losing a job and worrying about paying bills. Covid has only served to highlight the privilege that comes with being able to shelter in place. The systems and institutions which continue to increase rather than diminish the suffering of minorities and lower socio-economic households are systems and institutions we often turn blind eyes to. King of Glory is grateful to say none of our members has contracted Covid. Yet an ELCA Bishop in New York says some Latino congregations have an infection rate of 25-30% because their members are essential workers. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Here's the thing about grief. Avoiding it only makes it worse. As pastor and therapist Christine Ruth says, "What we resist, persists." The feelings we gloss over, will rise up until we acknowledge them. Furthermore we live in a culture that avoids death – well like the plague – like a pandemic. It's culturally acceptable to grieve a loved ones passing for oh about 4 hours and 22 minutes...just long enough to get through the funeral, reception and graveside. But not much longer.

Now I exaggerate to make the point. But in our society, no one likes a Debbie downer. No one wants to listen to a sob story for long. Here's the problem. We're all grieving something. All of us. There is something you and I are grieving because nothing is the way it used to be. We also have no idea how long this pandemic will continue.

Rev. Phil Wangberg is a pastor who wanted to change the Lord's prayer long before the official new Lord's Prayer came to be printed in our cranberry colored hymnals – the ELW. Whenever he taught on this prayer, he would offer this theological reflection.

For the petition that reads, "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil," Pastor Wangberg said, "It ought to read save us 'in' the time of trial. It ought to read, save us *in* the time of trial, not save us *from* the time of trial. Trials will come," he'd continue, "Trials will come to all of us. If we ask God to save us *from* the time of trial, what would we ever learn? God does the best work in times of suffering."

Rev. Wangberg's preferred rendition of that line of the Lord's Prayer is fitting right now. Our time of collective trial has come. The question becomes how can we grieve? Or rather, what can we learn? Many of us know first-hand that God indeed teaches us the most in times of suffering. Suffering and trials awaken us from the mind numbing habits and rituals that all too often regulate our days. In the time of trial our spirits and hearts are forced open to new understandings of God, self and our world.

You might remember Rabbi Kushner the man who wrote "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People". Rabbi Kushner had a son die at the age of 14. He admitted his new understanding through suffering saying, "Yes, I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor than I would have ever been had my son not had died. I would give up all those gains in a second to have my son back. If I could choose, I would forgo it all but I cannot choose."

None of us chose to have coronavirus come upon us. Yet it has. We cannot go around it, over it, under it. We must go through it. Furthermore God offers us the opportunity to learn from it. What are you learning from your grief? Increased patience? An increased hunger for intimacy with God? A deepened prayer life aligning our spirits with those whose suffering is greater than ours? Perhaps right now it might simply be an awareness of how grief is happening inside.

We do not know how long it will be until we can gather in any fashion like what we left behind. It likely will be through the summer, perhaps the fall. Maybe even longer until we can sit side by side, singing and praying. That grief will test our patience and our joyful spirit.

There is a new memorial set up near the front doors of the church. It is for we the people of King of Glory. I invite you to drop off flowers. Or write notes with the losses you are feeling. Find an object that represents your mourning and come put all those items at the KOG memorial for our lost time as community. Please be safe and socially distance if others are there when you are.

Furthermore it is in this moment that the Church, our church, King of Glory must not be stymied or frozen in time by grief. Being overcome in self-pity does not suit who we are as Easter people trusting in God's resurrection power! We must continue to listen to the Holy

Spirit our Comforter and Advocate leading and guiding us into new ways of being God's people for the sake of the world.

On her Wednesday devotion, Pr Deb issued a challenge to we the church. She asked us to write encouragement cards to people who will be receiving food baskets at House of Neighborly Service. A note that says perhaps, "May this food bless you!" Or "I'm praying for you. I don't know you, but God does!" We need 100 of these notes by Memorial Day, May 25th. Mail them to the church or drop them in the box by the front doors.

We often talk about being church outside the building. Well, literally here we are! Through coronavirus God can teach us greater solidarity with God's children through our mutual griefs and suffering. If we allow God's love to transform our grief into acts of loving kindness for the community, then we will embody the Holy Spirit who is both comforter and advocate. We will!

For it is in our sorrows that we are comforted by God and through that comfort we can comfort others. Thank you Holy Spirit for your work in us!

100 cards! We can do this! Rise to the challenge and write more than 100! They will make a difference to a neighbor who opens it and knows that a friend in Loveland is cheering them on or praying for them. If you need cards, there will be some extra by the church doors for you to take and use as well.

If we remember the early Church as recorded in Acts, beginning just after Jesus' resurrection, they worshipped in homes. Not in the temple. They remembered their neighbors with bread and offerings. This is now our ministry and mission.

I'm not diminishing in any way our loss at being a worshipping community. I encourage us to name that heart break for our healing. But perhaps the Holy Spirit has given us just a time as this to turn our grief into grace. Our mourning into ministry and mission. Our anger into advocacy. Our denial into faithful decisions. Our tears into trust for the ways God always has brought new life in the midst of pain and suffering. Our lament into love - visible signs of God's love.

Amen.