

*Reflection by the Rev. Canon Marlin Whitmer, June 7, 2020*

Several weeks ago, I asked John for permission to preach. With all the discussion around the coronavirus there was something missing. We had an elephant in the room and no one was talking about it. Folks were using grief language without using the word grief.

One week later a drastic and overwhelming change came with the death of George Floyd.

The overwhelming emotions generated from social injustice added to the 108,000 coronavirus deaths bringing grief and mourning out into the open big time.

I facilitated a grief recovery group for 17 years. If a participant came grieving a violent death, the surviving person was moved to individual appointments. Their emotions silenced the emotions of others in a group and no one talked. You can be overpowered. Numbing sets in, or an equal emotional reaction occurs; words just don't cut it when events become too staggering. Words need time to name the pain. And the words cover a wide range of feelings from discomfort, fatigue, frustration, distraction, upset, and grumpy, to disconnect, anguish, overwhelmed, exhausted, crazy times, etc.

My plan was to give the sermon on Trinity Sunday to celebrate my 90th birthday and 65th year of ordination. As circumstances changed my plans, Ron May brought the choir to our house and they made a half circle in the yard, distancing, singing two of my favorite hymns, Lord of the dance, and the Celtic ordination hymn which begins with the Trinity: "I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity. By invocation of the same, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." We are called into community as the Trinity is in community. The verse will be the foundation of all I say today with the mystery of the Trinity abiding in our presence.

My main task is to share some insights, secular and biblical, about grief and mourning. All persuasions are grieving and mourning. We are a nation and a people at grief. We are a grieving church. We grieve on many levels. And who knows how many other unresolved griefs linger at the same time.

My credentials for addressing the topic come from being a professional chaplain. The president of the chaplains' association wrote that grief work is one of our most important skills because to become a whole person requires healing. So, who can we look to for healing? Christ heals. Christ did grief work in the upper room, appearing to and being with the disciples, asking the two on the road to Emmaus to share what was going on in Jerusalem. He helped them to name it and talk about it. And with Peter, who betrayed him three times, Christ asked him three times: "Do you Love me? Feed my sheep."

My own grief stories begin early, at age five and then at age eight. The third-generation family farm was lost during the depression of 1938. In six years, we lived in seven different houses, I went to four different schools in three different towns, and we experienced poverty. I then lost a father with an unresolved grief and chronic depression. Grief can be experienced in many ways. I was a skinny runt, always the last chosen for sand lot softball — I did make it in high school wrestling at 112 pounds. — That kind of loss and grief left me with an inner anger needing healing. I have known healing over time.

Our griefs have to be faced, named, and acknowledged more than once. Here I find the lament psalms helpful; there are communal laments, and individual laments. We need both.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners is encouraging communal laments for our time. We all can write one. We can write a personal lament for not being able to worship together as a congregation in Church. But remember our Baptism. We are in Christ wherever we go, wherever we are. And we are the Church wherever we go, wherever we are, and we are in Christ and he is in us.

Lament Psalms have stages. The early stage addresses God, then the complaint follows by a petition. In the process, pain is named in powerful language, like Psalm 86 [v. 1]: “Bow down your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and in misery.”

With the coronavirus and social injustice, communal laments are needed. The titles of articles say it best: “Nightmare”, “Social Unrest”, “Parallel Crisis,” “Anguish”. In reality, the stages [of grief] are extended, taking longer than most people want to admit.

Our Prayer Book is a great resource for us here with all 150 Psalms, there you will find the laments, and in the back of the prayer book, special Prayers and Thanksgivings starting on page [810.]

Dr. Kubler Ross and her five stages on grief are still relevant. A Befriender working with the grief recovery group has a talk describing grief as work and windows. As work we are all over the emotional map, a mess of spaghetti as one person said, with the different strands representing different emotions appearing, disappearing, and reappearing another place. In the midst of the work we need window times. A time to see where we are. Back to Dr. Kubler Ross and her five windows.

There is denial, which we say a lot of early on: “This virus won’t affect me.”

There is anger: “You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities!”

There is bargaining: “Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?”

There is sadness: “I don’t know when this will end.”

And finally, there is acceptance: “This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed.” Acceptance, as you might imagine, is where the power lies. We find control in acceptance. I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually.

You can move these 5 windows to our life at Trinity Cathedral at present, to the social unrest, to any transition in life. As we share the stories during our window time we become mirrors of understanding to each other. Loving God, neighbor and self. Or as Shakespeare said, “the eye sees itself but by reflection.” We reflect all three: God, neighbor, and self.

David Kessler, another grief counselor, adds a couple more windows, finding meaning in the journey and anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief challenges our patience and our trust, even our Faith. We are grieving an uncertain future. We do not have a final outcome to many of our current issues. We are not back in church; the virus continues; social injustice continues; etc. Maintain the course.

The Psalms name God as stronghold, rock, and more, As Christ is in us and we in Him.

In the 17th Chapter of John [v.v. 25-26] Jesus prays,

“O righteous Father, the world doesn’t know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them.”

How is that lived out as we go through the process of being healed in our many griefs? I have a story that I lived the first year of my ordination. I was a curate at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Sioux City. C. B. Chesterman, a successful business, was paying my salary. Once a month he and his wife took me out to dinner at the best restaurant in Sioux City. I was twenty-five at the time; they were in their eighties. About the fifth month, I asked, “You folks have so much fun together; what is your secret?” He said without any hesitation, “We don't know each other yet.” Over 50 years and still getting acquainted. We don’t know each other yet. It is a life long journey and we are blessed to have each other as sojourners.

I end with the hope that we will continue to know each other, knowing and loving go together as Christ said:

“I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity. By invocation of the same, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”...

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.

Amen.