

Sermon-Jeremiah 31: 27-34
(March 18, 2018-5th Sunday in Lent)

One of the last courses I took before ordination was on pastoral care and grief, at the Lutheran seminary right here in Waterloo. One day my regular professor was away so Professor Delton Glebe took the class. Prof. Glebe was 85 and retired; he was a pioneer in researching and teaching about grief in North America and had worked with the famed Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross. He used an illustration that he called Glebe's Glob to describe the process of grief. He drew this odd amoeba-like shape on the blackboard and said that the shape represented all the relationships that made up who he was. He sectioned off the glob and put different people's names in it—his grandchildren, his wife, his children, close friends and acquaintances. He then erased the name of one of his grandchildren from the glob and shared with us that she had died 18 years previously. Professor Glebe said what makes grief so difficult is that when someone you care about dies a part of you goes with them and it leaves an empty space inside of you. We question, "Who are we now without this person in our lives?"

This sense of loss and questioning of identity is also happening in our faith story this morning. Jeremiah writes in the context of the Babylonian exile. The great city of Jerusalem lay in ruins—turned into a ghost town. Most of the prominent families sent to live in Babylon, present day Iraq. The people of Israel felt abandoned and forsaken by God. It is as if God was erased from their globs and they are in grief, "who are the chosen people now that God has abandoned them?"

Eventually, the book of Jeremiah comes to a certain acceptance about the people's fate. There are chapters about how to adjust to life in exile for example. Then comes today's reading, a profound admission by the prophet—the old covenant did not work. The people broke it wantonly and disobedience lead to Divine judgement. The people's focus on God was as a rule maker, judge and punisher of sins. Israel is weighed down by the burden of being imperfect and disappointing a demanding God, a burden that makes it too difficult if not impossible to move on. Israel needs a new covenant, a new relationship with God.

Professor Glebe told us that grief is like that, a new relationship develops with those we've loved and lost. He felt a turning point in his journey with grief came when the memories of his granddaughter no longer resulted in just pain and emptiness but also a touch of gratitude. The gratitude was small at first, but gradually it began to grow, until eventually the memories of his grandchild brought on mostly a sense of what a gift she had been to his life. Instead of the memories being just a source of overwhelming pain, they became more and more a source of comfort to him, because those memories and the impact of her life on him were things that nobody could take away. He then went back up to the board, drew a completely new section on his glob and wrote his granddaughter's name back into it. Professor Glebe said his relationship with his granddaughter could never be the same as it once was, and he could never be who he once was. The process of grief is not about going on with life as it was; it is about bringing the deceased person back into your life, into your identity in a completely new way and carrying on with life, not as before, but as a changed person.

That's Jeremiah's message to the nation of Israel. Jeremiah says God has never abandoned Israel. It is simply that they are holding on to their old and unhelpful ways of relating to God. The prophet tells the people that they need to bring God into their lives in a completely new way. Seeing God as rule maker, standards bearer, enforcer, and judge of morality was probably very useful after the escape from Egypt. As they wandered in the wilderness and then settled into their new homes, they needed rules to form them into a functioning community. However, things have changed; this Israel in exile is not the Israel of the desert or the Israel of the once mighty Jerusalem. The past is dying; Israel needs new ways of being community. Israel needs a God that will give them hope and life, they need a new covenant; "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and they shall all know me; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." In the new covenant, it is God who lifts the burden of human imperfection from the people of Israel. Israel can start anew. The idea of God as punisher is relinquished and God is brought back into people's lives as a God of mercy and compassion, a God who has a deep desire for communion with the people, not in purity, but in their humanity.

Let me tell you a story. I have friend, who I'll call Tony. Tony had an interesting background; he had been a biker. Tony had a hard family life growing up, which lead him as a teen to seek relief in what became a cocaine addiction, which lead him through the spiral of criminal activity to join the biker gang. He had done some terrible things in his life. Eventually, after serving prison time he started to question what he was doing with his life.

Tony at great personal risk, severed ties with the biker gang and moved away. He got into therapy but he still found himself starting to make contact with the wrong kind of people. In counseling, he realized that his biggest obstacle was the belief he held that he did not deserve any better. At his core, he was ashamed of whom he was and he therefore felt unacceptable in any lifestyle, save the criminal one. He felt caught between a comfortable and familiar world that was killing him and a world that held the promise of new life but was alien and frightening. It was at this time in his life that Tony experienced a spiritual awakening. Tony had grown up in a religion of rules, where God was the enforcer and punisher. Since he did not hang around with the sort of people who had church weddings, funerals were his only occasion to attend church. It was at a funeral that the awakening happened. The priest was reading the passage from Luke where Jesus is on the cross with the two criminals. One criminal mocks Jesus, but the other tells his friend to shut-up, that they are getting what they deserve but Jesus has done nothing wrong. Then he pleads with Jesus, "remember me when you come into your kingdom", and Jesus responds, "truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." The awakening came to Tony like one of those flowers blossoming in time-lapse photography...perhaps he was worthy of redemption? If a criminal on a cross, at the last minutes of his life can be saved, can experience the love of God, perhaps he to was worthy of that love? Perhaps God was a God of mercy and compassion. As this revelation blossomed fully in his soul, a warm feeling came over him and there were tears--a release of old ideas an opening up to new possibilities and the promise of joy. Tony said it was the beginning of truly putting his old life behind him. God was back into his life in a new way, a new covenant, and he could begin to move on.

I heard a preacher once who probably best described this new covenant—he said, “You can’t run from God, because if you’re running from his love than you’re running toward his mercy.” Israel’s God, our God is a gracious God, a God that deeply desires to be known by us and therefore tears down all the barriers that stand in the way of that relationship. But, we have to be ready to abandon the places that God has left, seek God where he/she may be found. If you’re feeling stuck, in a rut, if you’re feeling spiritually dry you might begin by asking these questions, “God, have you left this place?”, “Where are you now?”, “How do I start heading in your direction?” In this way the Holy One might settle into our lives in a whole new way and we will experience the grace that our God, our Mother, our Father is with us always. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar