

Sermon – “Necessary Losses”

Gospel Reading – Psalm 130, John 11:17-45

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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In our first scripture reading, Psalm 130, the psalmist cries from out of the depths expressing both quiet desperation and a confident faith. According to Charles Cousar, the psalm voices Erik Erikson’s “basic trust,” in which buoyant Israel hopes for that which it does not have in hand, because it trusts fully in God’s faithfulness. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem. It is God who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Our second scripture reading is found in the gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 17-45. We begin reading in the midst of John’s account of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. In telling the story John is clearly setting the stage for Jesus’ own death and resurrection: the historical event, which proclaimed Jesus Christ as the life giving power of God. However, before life can be given anew, there must first be death. Listen now for God’s Holy Word.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of God." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

The title of the sermon: "Necessary Losses"

The text: Jesus began to weep...But some of them said, 'Could not he...have kept this man from dying? John 11:35, 37

Let us pray. Holy God, open our eyes to see that you did not come to keep us from dying but to offer us the life giving power of your love in the midst of the losses that are a part of our living and loving. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

*For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under the heavens...
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to dance and a time to mourn,
a time to seek and a time to lose.
For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under the heavens.*

Last weekend Peter and I traveled to Phoenix, Arizona to officiate the wedding for the daughter of a dear friend from my days as an associate pastor in Belleville, Illinois. The journey brought back memories of another season in my life and the births and deaths that I have shared with this beloved friend. I visited Kathy and her husband the day their daughter Rachel was born at St. Luke's Hospital in St. Louis and a few months later had the joy of baptizing her. Our friendship remained strong across the miles in spite of personal and professional moves, ironically growing closer from a distance. Kathy was visiting me in Springfield last October the day my father died. Her presence was a great comfort to me in this time of loss and letting go.

When people ask what books have had the greatest impact on me as a person, the first book that comes to my mind (besides the Bible of course) is Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst. I read this book during my time as associate in Belleville before I met Peter and while I was working toward my Doctor of Ministry degree in Pastoral Counseling at Eden Seminary. In this small, profound book, Judith Viorst explores how we grow and change through the losses that are an inevitable and necessary part of life. She writes:

I've learned that in the course of our life we leave and are left and let go of much that we love. Losing is the price we pay for living. It is also the source of much of our growth and gain. Making our way from birth to death, we also have to make our way through the pain of giving up some portion of what we cherish.

There is plenty we have to give up in order to grow, for we cannot deeply love anyone without becoming vulnerable to loss. And we cannot become separate people, responsible people and connected people without some losing and leaving and letting go. (page 368)

During my ministry some of the most intimate moments I have had the privilege to share with members and friends are those times when I am with them in their *losing and their leaving and their letting go*. And what I have learned over the years is all people really ask during these times is to be allowed to have their feelings, their sorrow, their pain, as they cry from the depth of their hearts. We need to simply be present with those who walk through their own valley without trying to deny it, take it away or make it better.

Although this is always difficult, because we are people of faith we can gain strength through our losses and the losses of those we love. We can because we believe that God is not only the

author of life, God has the power to bring life out of death, light out of darkness, new beginnings out of endings and gain out of loss.

This idea of a life giving God is not unique to the New Testament writers. Yahweh as a life giving God is woven throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. It is part of the reason the psalmist can cry "out of the depths," from a deep valley. Israel wants to be heard by the God of steadfast love and mercy, for being heard means being honored, being taken seriously, and thereby being empowered.

Today we continue our Lenten journey toward Holy Week, which begins next Sunday. A week, set aside by Christians throughout the world, to commemorate the final days of Christ's life, his death and resurrection. For the fourth Sunday in a row, the Gospel lesson comes from the theologically rich narratives of John—the stories of Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and now Lazarus' untimely death. In each encounter we see a very human Jesus becoming vulnerable to loss as he connects with the people God brings into his life.

In fact John tells us that Jesus' loved Lazarus. His death was a tremendous loss for Jesus as well as his sisters. Because there was such a deep affection between Jesus and this family, one must be careful not to overreach on the interpretation of Jesus' raising Lazarus. Jesus deeply loved this family; however his actions are not intended to take away the necessary losses that are a part of our humanity. It's interesting how both Mary and Martha mention if only Jesus had been here—this would not have happened. By staying away until after Lazarus died, Jesus gently reminds us that he cannot protect those he loves from life's losses and neither can we.

Jesus didn't raise Lazarus from the dead so they would not have to experience the pain of death, but rather as a sign to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed sent by God and had the power to give life. As one reads this story one cannot help but be taken by the many similarities and parallel phrases between this resurrection and Christ's own. So much here is reminiscent of Gethsemane, Golgotha and Easter:

Jesus is deeply moved and troubled. Jesus weeps. The tomb is near Jerusalem; the tomb is a cave with a huge stone covering it, the stone is rolled away. Jesus cries with a loud voice, the grave clothes are removed from the one who was dead but is now alive. As Fred Craddock points out, "One can hardly read the account and continue to think of Lazarus, one thinks of Jesus."

According to John's gospel, the plot against Jesus' life began immediately following this incident. Jesus accepted his own death. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, *"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour."*

When we are called to our own valley or Gethsemane to face the inevitable losses that are a part of living and loving, may we accept our destiny with as much courage and grace as the One who joined us in our humanity and who then went on to conquer death by dying on a cross.

The story about the raising of Lazarus confirms the larger story of faith that acknowledges death as a necessary loss, the final loss, the final leaving and letting go. Our faith doesn't try to deny it, take it away or make it better.

Rather, our faith announces the good news that life will not be overcome by death, that deep in the human heart is the unquenchable trust that life does not end with death, the One who created us will care for us beyond the bounds of our vision. Our sure Redeemer will offer us the life giving power in the midst of the losses that are a part of our living and loving.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under the heavens...

A time to be born and a time to die,

a time to dance and a time to mourn,

a time to seek and a time to lose.

For everything there is a season.

Because of Jesus Christ we can live with meaning, we can die with hope and we can mourn the losses and celebrate the new beginnings in each season of our lives. Amen.