

25 February 2018

Second Sunday in Lent

Lectionary RCL Texts: Genesis 17:1-16 (*NRSV*); Psalm 22 Response: “O G!d do not be far away”; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

In the story of Sisyphus, (is that name familiar to you?) Sisyphus, he pushes a boulder uphill only to watch it roll back to the bottom. He is punished to eternally suffer this task and this heavy stone. All day, every day, he struggles with the heaviness, the pain, and the futility. Albert Camus¹ writes about Sisyphus and his incessant toil, calling it absurd. However, he looks carefully at the moment when the rock is released to roll back down the hill. He examines the footsteps as Sisyphus walks back down the hill. Camus dares to imagine Sisyphus happy in his torment; the freedom, the relief, the knowing the rock is waiting at the bottom. He wrote, “There is but one world. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man²”. Even though we each have our boulder to accompany us, (or as Christians say, their cross to bear), our internalized suffering co-habitates in a world where there is Sun and sky, the sound of rain, and the peeps of frogs.

In this February Spring that we’re having, we witness... life, living, moving outside. Norris seems to be alive with field sports and strollers and bikes. Games of soccer pop up on the Commons or people throw a ball to one another. The walking paths are active. I see whole families out. If you have been down to Songbird Trail it’s a little more crowded than usual. The weather brings people out.

¹ Camus, Albert. “The Myth of Sisyphus”. New York: NYU, n.d. <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/hell/camus.html> Web.

² Camus, Albert. “The Myth of Sisyphus”. New York: NYU, n.d. <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/hell/camus.html> Web.

And yet ...at the center of it all, we have a heavy-laden river and Norris Dam, like mighty outstretched arms, holding back a full reservoir. The trees around the Clinch look to be drowning. The fullness, the passing clouds, the off/on rain are representative of something. We don't like to think about it. We'd rather focus on the clarity, the sense of newness and a change of season.

The thing we don't like to think about. Our grief. Our loss. They are no less heavy. For many, a change of season, or seeing a wildflower, represents a reminder; a mark. And if someone has that reminder, they often feel obligated to push grief-related reminders down, or at the very least, hide it until they're alone. We have ways of "protecting" by not showing grief while at work, not shedding tears in front of children, holding back emotions in classrooms and in places where we shop. So many will wait until they're alone. No one can understand *your* loss. Whether the death of a beloved or surviving some other tragedy. Your grief experience is your own. In the midst of all the Spring-like weather and yellow daffodils, it's still going to be there, often invisible. Grief and loss are there like the river, winding its way through our lives. / Grief, its steady presence in the valley, like the river, is a reminder of the life-giving thing we have lost: A relationship, a loved one, a home or sense of belonging. When we lose something life-giving we grieve.

In our Gospel we have something very clear about someone wishing to avoid loss, someone adamantly attempting to stand in the way of that swollen river. Like a diagnosis, Jesus shares the news of His future. The truth embedded in The Plan. He speaks of suffering and of victory. Peter only hears suffering. Imagine your friend that you love like a sibling, imagine your greatest most beloved teacher, says something that sounds

outlandish, impossible, and horribly tragic. This is more than something like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. This is unthinkable. To quote Mark Twain, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand”. Professor Black of Princeton Theological says, “There is little in this teaching that requires deep-sea exegesis. It’s plain, hard, and inescapable³”. Peter reacts with such rejection. He is not rejecting his beloved Jesus. Peter is rejecting pain. Peter is rejecting loss. Rejecting anything about this plan that sounds insane. He is not rejecting Love, he’s rejecting what he believes Death represents: loss. The rejection itself is a disruption of the Divine plan, a disruption that Jesus calls Satan. Ha-Satan, the Disruption. He follows this by reminding all of them that this is bigger than flesh and blood, bigger than earth...this whole plan is blending the spiritual with the physical, this is the whole point, the Son of G!d existing in the world as a vessel for Spirit and leading by example. Even still, it is a terminal diagnosis He delivers and the one they want to avoid. /

I met with someone this week that mentioned a spinning wheel. I thought of that as a metaphor for the life cycle, the repetitive loop. In relation to grief, the things, the moment, the words where we get stuck and spin over and over. The repetition keeps us in place like we cannot move on from that one stuck spot. It can be maddening. In the immediate days, weeks, months following a loss, a conversation, a doubt, a regret, last words spoken, are unfinished business, and they all become the unending repetition. These become the story being spun. Through that spinning we are memorizing. And memorization is how we learn. / Like the song this

³ Black, C. Clifton. “Commentary on Mark 8:31-38”. *WorkingPreacher.org*. St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2018. Web.

morning of call and response, *We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle*, we listen, we repeat, and we sing together in a movement that can be emotional, it draws upon something and works together in an echo of leading and following... a dancing sound. /

Our stories, our experiences, our relationships—living or in living memory—are poetry. When we are touched in a way that taps into grief, that poetry becomes a lament and often involves a Spiritual conversation. That may be in the form of prayer and may contain anger, blame, a petition and sometimes...thanks. /

Professor Black summarizes the Gospel passage from Mark in this way:

"Christian faith is not a lifestyle choice; it is a vocation to never ending struggle.... Rejecting the Son of Man, desperately trying to save our own lives, we lose our Selves [our psyche] -- just as Jesus assured us we would in Mark 8:35-37. Only by giving ourselves to others as Jesus gave Himself for us (10:45) will we ever find ourselves⁴."/

When I worked as a Chaplain at the Women's and Babies Hospital, many visits were marked by acute grief. In addition to the many joys found at a baby hospital, the many passes through the lobby with balloons and wheelchairs and lots of new things and car seats...the reality of peri-and neo-natal loss could either be ignored or addressed. The team I had the privilege to work with would *embrace* the loss. I sat with Mothers as they held the bodies of their newborns. We had a photographer who captured images: fingers and toes, curls of the hair, the little mouths and ears. We had volunteers who were always delivering hand-made knitted caps that seemed impossibly small. Oh, having the honor to be in the room when Parents were

⁴ Black, C. Clifton. "Commentary on Mark 8:31-38". *WorkingPreacher.org*. St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2018. Web.

singing to, holding, bathing, and dressing their babies for the first and last time. As the Chaplain, I would sometimes go to the morgue and retrieve a blanketed bundle. Within the *embrace* of those blankets were the losses of dreams. Those were deeply moving experiences. We were able to allow this (to create safe space for this) after so many years of hospitals whisking away death. Infant mortality was a physical disappearance and the deep scar of an emotional wound. *Embracing* this, experiencing this with each patient, the meaning, relationship, and connection of a space between life and loss was (and is) profound. /

There is no forgetting. Loss and grief can inadvisably be ignored, swallowed, and rejected. Or loss can be *embraced* as an inevitable aspect encapsulated into every life. Sisyphus had to press his body into that boulder and *embrace* it. I think it bears saying again. No one can understand what *you* have lost. Tears and feelings are allowed. They're allowed to be shed and shared in the places we call Sanctuary. We are living in a time where people don't feel safe in spaces to learn, to worship, to walk alone, to cry. We can't run out of safe spaces. We need to create and sustain them, protect them, so we can provide them.

Jesus was not here to be forgotten. He showed that Death was not the end. To try to begin to understand Him we have to lose everything. We have to be willing to experience great loss and suffer the torment of grief. That's asking a lot. // Because His death is recorded and repeated. We study it as a way of understanding ourselves and making our lives align with a higher purpose. Chances are, each person has an opportunity at a time of loss and grief to attach

those feelings of rejection...or *embrace* their Higher Power. Death becomes the answer to life and life is the answer to death in a cycle that every single one of us experiences. In so much that death, though a separation becomes a gateway to our relationships that shape our individual Spirituality. And I know it's not a fun topic but it's one we all experience. Your grief is your own. This time of Lent is the wandering in the wilderness and as we get closer and closer to Easter we approach that cycle: death into life.

Let us pray: Ancient One, in this season of Lent, we ask for an ounce of Your holy wisdom in this mystery of life, death, and resurrection. We ask for patience when faced with the saga of grief, and Your healing when faced with the pain of loss. Remind us of the Divine Element at work. Help us to *embrace* and hold onto Love and Light in our darkest times and guide us to be gentle with ourselves and others as we witness humans on a journey.
Amen.