

“Space for Lament”

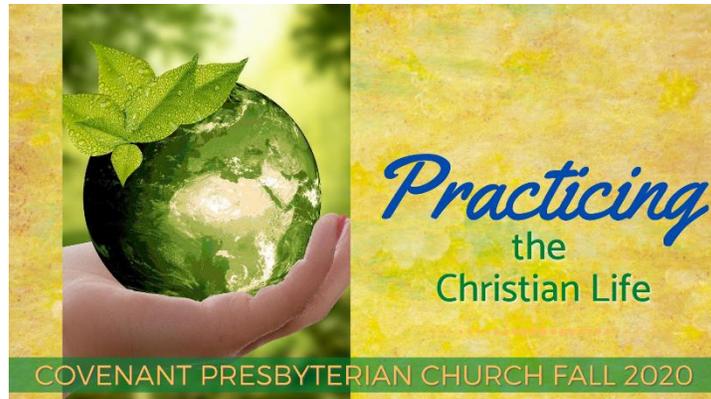
Psalm 23:4

Sunday, October 11, 2020

Sue Melrose

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, Wisconsin



These last four weeks our sermons have focused on the book *Practicing: Changing Yourself to Change the World* by Kathy Escobar. Healing, loving, advocating, including, next week celebrating—and this week the practice of mourning, of grieving.

There is no shortage of scripture about mourning:

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. (Matt 5: 4)

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. (Rom 12:15)

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. (Eccl 3:4)

Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. (John 11:35) Abraham mourned at the tomb of Sarah in Hebron. And who could forget the anguished cry of grief of David, O Absalom, O Absalom, my son. That I would have died instead of you.

We know the seasons of life include grieving. In those seasons, the scripture we turn to most often is Psalm 23—clinging particularly to older translations of verse 4:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

We walk through dark valleys at the death of one we love. We mourn now over the myriad of losses of our time. A million deaths. The loss of social interaction “in the flesh.” The devastation of wildfires and hurricanes. The loss of certainty, holding on to the fraying threads of political stability and racial justice. Newspapers and blogs are full of reflections on the pain we feel: it is grief. We know it. We experience it in the rant of the first grader who balks at online school—because that isn’t school! I know it in the

baking of more cookies than I have made in a decade – and eating every single one of them – trying to fill up the void left by what is no longer.

Kathy Escobar notes what is so true: we try to escape grief, to truncate it, to get over it, to find the light switch to take away the darkness. We need to give time—to give space to mourning. Easier said than done.

My first lesson in grief came during a summer in seminary when I volunteered for a social service program in London, serving in the Borough of Lambeth. One of the first days, an experienced social worker took me along for a visit to an older client of his who had been widowed eight months earlier. She was having a hard time, he told me. She had few financial resources, lived in Council Housing, had no children, but he said, “Mostly she was simply grieving the one with whom she had shared over 60 -70 years of life, surviving the depression and then World War II with its relentless bombings. “

He continued as we drove: “There are colleagues of mine who think she should be done grieving by now, be able to get on with it. But my theory? If it takes us 9 months to prepare for a birth, why do we think it takes any less to deal with death? And we know that birth is not the end of preparing and changing and adapting. The same is true with death. She needs time. And she will need more time.” I returned to visit her weekly during that summer, sitting with her as she mourned.

Sitting with mourners: Jews sit shiva: seven days as friends drop by, often with food in hand to spare the family of the burden of preparing a meal. We do similar acts as a Christian community – not exactly the way we have in the past right now – but still we drop off a cake, make a phone call, send a card – all of which many of us know personally is deeply appreciated by the receiver. These acts--these offerings of friends in the faith--are a reminder that in life’s dark valley, God is with us. When we do this, both give and receive, we are practicing mourning.

Mourning is not an easy practice. Mourning is to enter deep, raw pain. Grieving is messy.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross developed a theory of what she called “the Stages of Death and Dying” that grew out of her work with cancer patients. Soon she and colleagues realized the same can be applied to those who grieve. The stages have become familiar to most of us. They can be a tidy way to analyze “where we are” in the grieving process: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.

But the reality is much more complicated. (Facebook post slide). A tangled mess is a much better image than some kind of linear chart or simple bell curve – entangles in all the so-called stages of grief. One has said, “Grief is a raw encounter with the Holy.”

Grief has the abrasive quality of Psalm 22 – the lament that Jesus cries from the cross – *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me..... I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast...*”

Grief is flailing against God like a toddler throwing a tantrum – until we realize that God is holding us in a tight embrace and we allow ourselves to dissolve into tears. It is then that we move into the next Psalm – Psalm 23: *You are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me.*

Our faith -- in Christ who conquered death on the cross – allows us, if we will -- to enter into the practice of mourning – mourning our own losses and sitting with those who mourn, to mourn, that we may take the tentative steps toward healing for ourselves and others. It isn’t easy. But, God is with us.

In practicing mourning, Escobar lifts up the activity of “Less and More”:

Less talk, more presence

Less advice, more questions

Less anxiety, more trust

Less perfection, more grace

It is so easy to become like the friends of Job trying to find a reason for his suffering, prying him for personal information, advising. Friends who – well, who needs friends like these?

I particularly like her “less and more” of *less perfection, more grace*. It is a simple “I’m sorry.” I’m sorry to myself when I find I am talking, advising, and letting my anxiety spill out all over the place -- to realize that often all we need to say to the person in the midst of deep grief is, “I’m sorry.”

Too often our own pain may hold us back from reaching out. But, we can get creative.

A young mother had gone through a wrenching loss of her mother. The church had surrounded her with love and given her space, taking her children for playdates, bringing meals.

Soon afterwards another church member died. She told me, “I can’t go to another funeral – not yet. But I want to do something.” She called the family and offered to stay at their house during the funeral. A friend had done the same for her – a deterrent against a spate of what funeral home directors were calling “obituary burglaries.”

As she house-sat, she just sat for a while looking out at their garden seeing a beauty she hadn’t noticed in a while. Then she got up, pulling things together for the family gathering afterwards – making iced tea and lemonade, getting out plates and silverware so they could easily eat from the numerous casseroles and cakes that had been dropped off by friends.

She gave herself some grace and offered the same to others. In her brokenness she helped another in theirs.

In this eighth, tenth, whatever month it is of this pandemic, we can offer ourselves some grace – time to admit our deep sense of loss and give others space themselves. We can practice mourning – give ourselves some space. Our hearts and lives are broken in ways unexpected. But, God is with us.

In God’s good time, the breaking heart is repaired. Escobar writes of the Japanese practice of Kintzugi: repairing broken pottery with a paste of lacquer and the dust of a precious metal – gold, silver, or platinum. In the repair, the break is highlighted. The pottery has a different beauty. The break is claimed and is shown as part of the pottery’s history rather than something to hide.

When our hearts break in times of loss – ours or another’s -- we enter into the practice of mourning. We walk through this darkest valley; we fear no evil. For God is present and comforts us.

In our mourning, we are blessed. We are comforted. In the midst of lament, we find space for God to heal us, space to discover hope, space for beauty to fill us, space for opening up once again to life.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives.