

What Becomes of the Brokenhearted?

Genesis 23:1-6
Revelation 21:1-4
August 7, 2022

Rev. Robert R. Howard
Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tempe, AZ

Long, long ago, when deep pain was just a theory to this minister-in-training, a wise professor told our seminary class, “whenever you step up to the pulpit, you will face two kinds of people: those who *are* grieving — and those who *will*.” Life turns theory into practice. We don’t have to look around — we *know* who is grieving today. Well, we know *some* of those who are grieving. Others would not dare show it. But you don’t walk this earth for long before you learn that life yanks away what we hold dear in countless ways. We grieve the loss of many things — people, dreams for our lives, beloved pets, marriages that fell apart, even favorite ice-cream flavors that have been discontinued. Be they large or small, we mourn our losses. And Lord knows that these past two years — lock-downs, job losses, fear grappling with the need to be with others, and losing a million souls to Covid in this nation alone, some of them people we know — all of that loss piling up has left gaping holes in our souls. It’s been too strong, gone on too long. “What becomes of the broken-hearted,” asked Jimmy Ruffin half a century ago.(1) And still we wonder. In the name of Jesus Christ, what becomes of the broken-hearted?

Well, look what happens, all too often. You are expected to move on. Get over it, just like that. “After the last casserole dish is picked up,” psychotherapist Patrick O’Malley reminds us, “the outside world stops grieving with you.”(2) We did our thing with you, said those words, now get on with your life. Too often, that’s what mourners get from this world. Life has moved on — and so should you. And sometimes worse. Who has not heard cutting words spoken, sometimes with the best intentions? “God must have needed another angel.” But what about *my* need? I’m not ready to let go. “You can always have another child.” Really? Really? We are just interchangeable parts? No, no, this baby was unique! All my dreams for her crashed down, shattered into a million jagged pieces, now buried with her in that tiny hole. Harsh words, spoken in the kindest of tones. But revealing the attitude of this world — don’t bother me with your pain. Don’t remind me of my own journey. Get over it. Resume your life as if nothing has happened. I don’t care if you deserve an Oscar for “best actor appearing to be normal.” Move on. The world shoves all our griefs away. Always has.

So too many of us bury our feelings. All too often, we just pack them up, tape down the boxes, and shove them into the back corner of an inner closet, underneath some threadbare blankets. What happens when we do so? What happens? Those feelings, all that deep, deep attachment, the tears, the sorrow? What becomes of *them*? Why, they go away! Just like magic! Whshhht! I have now achieved “closure.” Right? Right? Oh, would that it were so, friends and neighbors. No, we’ve seen those whose mourning has been short-circuited. Wounded, they are, broken hearts still broken, decades later. Sometimes they are *stuck* grieving, forever grieving. And then they will lash out at the tiniest thing, perpetually mad at everything and everybody. The bottled-up energy just will not stay bottled-up. Hurt people can hurt people. Buried grieving, halted prematurely, *will* poison lives. Even the lives of nations. Who can say whether today’s social ills are partly caused by unfinished grieving? I remember the first anniversary of the catastrophe of September 11. Two

occasions marked the day: in New York City, at the hole still scarring the earth, all day long, reading the almost three thousand names out, name by name. The names piled up, the tears poured out. Spoken aloud, all the names of the dear ones we were missing so. Each one, name by name, name by name, all 2,606 of them. And another event, that same day, at the Pentagon. Repaired completely, splendid, bright, shining. We will not be bowed. Celebrating our resolve. Looking as if *nothing had ever happened*. The danger, you see, is that if we try to act as if this grievous wound never happened, we risk sending the message that it *doesn't matter*. “Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die.”(3) And then people get stuck, their grieving shoved down, with no healthy outlet. Individuals — and even nations. Broken still.

Hear the Good News: God has a different opinion. We *do* matter, each and every one of us. We matter to God. Remember, from the Twenty-Third psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *thou art with me*.” David knew first-hand what he was talking about. Hear him bellow out his anguish, “Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33) And precisely *in* the agony of his loss, he discovered, “Thou art with me.” Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus his friend, bowed His head, covered His face, and just wept. (John 11:35) And in that act, He who was called “God *with us*” (Matthew 1:23) spoke through his silent tears: Lazarus *mattered*. Each and every human life *matters*. And God says that you and me and all the billions and billions of folks who have ever walked this earth — or never *had* a chance to walk it — *all* of us, every last blessed one, *matter*. Are worthy of love. Are *cherished* in God’s vast heart that is bigger than the entire *universe*. Sheltered. Remembered. And do you think that the One Who created us, Who knows us better than we know ourselves, does not understand the agony when those thousands of tiny roots that have grown together in love, have suddenly been torn apart? Does not know that our tears give silent testimony to the immeasurable depth of our love? The mystery of eternal love is that God *shares* our tears, *understands* our pain — better than we do. And embraces them in magnificent love. The promise is that God will personally wipe away every last tear. (Revelation 21:4) Which seems to assume that we *will* cry. But never alone. Never! For the hand that wipes away every tear, you see, is one thoroughly “acquainted with grief.”(Isaiah 53:3, KJV) A hand with the nail-cuts still showing. And, in ways beyond the human tongue’s capacity to name, that hand still brings comfort, *still* tenderly wipes away every tear. Because we *do* matter, every last one of us. We matter to God.

And here is the earthly miracle. Here is a bedrock truth that will outlast all the “get over it” sandy soil this world knows. The ones who are best equipped to rush to the aid of mourners deep in the shadows of their grieving are . . . those who have been there. Those who have trudged through the midnight hells of loss themselves. There is no stronger power in heaven and earth than the phrase: “I have been there.” What else lies beneath the very incarnation of Jesus Christ? Divinity leapt into human flesh, so that God, too, could say, “I have been there.” And then Jesus Christ sends other humans whose *wounds* can heal the broken-hearted. Yes! How? How is such a thing possible? Here we find ourselves “dancing the edge of mystery,”(4) beyond any lockstep “stages of grief.” For in the mystery of God’s love in Jesus Christ, we ordinary mortals are somehow enabled to comfort one another with a *divine* consolation. Paul just stands stunned when he marvels: “Blessed be the God . . . of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, *so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.*” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) Oh, there are certainly grief support groups available, and we’ve printed up a list of local groups for those who might be interested.(5) But there are things each one of us can do to help as well. Just like those Hittites did to honor immigrant

Abraham mourning his wife. Whenever we dare to *hear* their pain, rather than saying “Shhh! Don’t say that!” – we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we say, “I’m so sorry for your loss,” rather than “she must be a peace now,” we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we listen to the same story over and over and over, for the 500th time, we ordinary mortals bring the consolation of *God*. Whenever we feel like we’ve turned into waterlogged sponges, so many tears have been sobbed onto our shoulder, we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we “weep *with* those who weep,” we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we just let them chatter on, providing an ear that does not judge, we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we just sit there on the slip-covered sofa in silence, suffering with them, we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we send a card months later, that says, “I know this might be a hard day for you,” we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we let them rouse us at three in the bloomin’ morning, just to talk on the phone, we bring the consolation of God. Whenever we let their anguish spill out, their frustration that they *haven’t* moved on, their raw anger at the very one who died, we bring the consolation of God.(6) We, who wonder what good we can possibly do, we who are all too painfully aware of our own shortcomings . . . *we* can bring the consolation of God. And maybe, maybe, in the deep Mystery that is God’s love, we who thought we were there to give, also *receive* the consolation of God, whenever we are willing to *be* there for them. The consolation of God. Through us.

What becomes of the broken-hearted? Oh, sometimes they can get stuck, true enough. But sometimes the miracle of God’s healing comes through hands that look strangely like ours, voices that sound like ours, ears that are brave enough to listen to pain. And they will be like the depressed patient whose unfathomable suffering had robbed her of her voice, who could only draw a bare stick of a tree in art therapy, point to it, and then to herself. “*That is me.*” Every day, a bare-stick tree, the woman pointing to it, then herself. And then one day, one day, on the tree . . . the tiniest flower appeared. The finger pointed to the painting . . . then to herself.(7) The broken-hearted *will* be healed, whispers the promise. Every tear *will* be tenderly wiped away. And we, too, can help bring the consolation of God. Amen.

Notes

- (1) Written by William Weatherspoon, Paul Riser, and James Dean, 1966; accessed online on 9/19/15 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Becomes_of_the_Brokenhearted.
- (2) Patrick O’Malley, “Getting Grief Right,” *New York Times* Opinionator: Couch, January 10, 2015; accessed online on 9/5/15 at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/10/getting-grief-right/>.
- (3) Mary Elizabeth Frye, “Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep;” accessed online on 9/19/15 at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/do-not-stand-at-my-grave-and-weep/>
- (4) David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 189.
- (5) Grief Support Groups in the Phoenix Metro Area: <https://www.hov.org/our-care/grief-support/grief-support-groups/>
- (6) Actions suggested by Lani Leary, *No One Has to Die Alone: Preparing for a Meaningful Death* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2012), 153-57.
- (7) Adapted from Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 122.