

The Lessons of Loss

Rev. Mark Hayes

September 14, 2008

Reading 1: from “Loss: The Litmus Test of a Religious Faith” by John Nichols

Grief is the experience of sadness, which happens after any loss. We don't like to think about our losses, but in our growing up there have been a number of them for each of us. Each loss conditions us, for better or worse, for the next. Our happiness in maturity depends upon the ways in which we have accepted our losses. It depends on how or whether we have grieved along the way.

This seems strange because we are not accustomed to thinking of grief in any way other than that associated with death. Nevertheless, people grieve when they clearly cease to have the protections of childhood. They grieve when they go away from home for the first time. They grieve when they have to give up their first love. They grieve when they suffer serious illness or injury. They grieve when they leave each stage of life for another. People grieve when they change jobs or homes; when they leave one beloved and comfortable community for another. For a teenager the end of an infatuation or friendship can bring on a grief as profound and serious as the grief which may follow the death of a grandparent. If we minimize the grief of the young or the old, or our own grief, for whatever reason it may occur, then we do not contribute to their strengthening and growing or to our own. . .

The richer our lives are the more vulnerable we are to loss. Each loss involves a partial disintegrating of the universe in which we live – and at least a challenge to our way of looking at life and the world. For better or worse, we are conditioned to meet these challenges by the ways in which we were encouraged to adapt to earlier losses in our lives. Grief is not to be belittled. It is the very process by which we grow up either to confront the world in which loss is always possible [and] meet it on its own terms . . . or to hide from it.

Reading 2: from *Love & Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*
by Forrest Church

When I was young, I thought death took courage. I was wrong. Dying may take courage, but death requires little courage at all. It is love that requires courage, because the people we love most may die before we do. Dare to love and we instantly become vulnerable, a word that means “susceptible to being wounded.” Our mother struggles for life in a hospital, or our son risks his in a distant land. At such moments the courage to love is nothing less than the courage to lose everything we hold most dear. Love another with all our heart and we place our hearts in jeopardy, one so great that the world as we know it can disappear between the time we pick up the telephone and when we put it down. Love is grief's advance party.

Every time we give our heart away, we risk having it dashed to pieces. Fear promises a safer path: refuse to give away your heart and it will never be broken. And it is true, armored hearts are invulnerable. We can eliminate a world of trouble from our lives simply by closing our hearts. Yet the trouble from which we are liberating

ourselves is necessary trouble. We need it as we need breath. Since the most precious and enduring lifework is signed by love, to avoid the risk of love is to cower from life's only perfect promise.

Meditation: from "The Lessons of Loss" by Carol Galginaitis

Grief shared is grief diminished. Unfortunately, in our culture it is very hard to find people with whom to share our grief. The bereaved often find that former friends now are embarrassed by our presence, and find reasons to make a quick exit. Many don't want to catch our misfortune, so avoid us completely. As a result, we lose not only our loved one, but many of those other important relationships that sustained us in earlier, happier times.

A religious community should be different. After all, what initially brings us to a house of worship? The reasons are varied, but central among them is the ability to find a place where we feel safe exposing our flaws and uncovering our pain. We seek a community where people will "walk through the nettles" with us, where we can drop all pretense and admit that when we fully enter into life, we also fully enter into loss.

Sermon

We come together today to consider the lessons of loss. This is, of course, an immense topic, and so I offer the usual disclaimer about my inability to really do it justice. But I would like to discuss briefly a number of those lessons that can be garnered from the human experience of loss.

The first point I'd like to address is the question of what it means for a loved one to be dead and gone. In what sense are they gone? Are they really gone? Certainly their physical presence is no longer a part of our daily experience. And yet – even if we have no particular belief in a literal afterlife – there are certainly senses in which they are not really gone.

Our Choral Anthem this morning spoke of the departed as being in the wind, and the snow, and the rain; in the "sweet uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight." In fact any little bit of life that calls our loved one to mind - that brings back a small piece of our shared life with them – is a form of presence that they still maintain, even in death. That song reminded me of a similar poem by Senegalese poet and storyteller, Birago Diop, who writes:

Those who are dead are never gone;
They are there in the thickening shadow.
The dead are not under the earth;
They are in the tree that rustles,
They are in the wood that groans,
They are in the water that sleeps,
They are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
The dead are not dead.
Those who are dead are never gone,
They are in the breast of the woman,
They are in the child who is wailing

And in the firebrand that flames.
The dead are not under the earth;
They are in the fire that is dying,
They are in the grasses that weep,
They are in the whimpering rocks
They are in the forest, they are in the house,
The dead are not dead.

[quoted in *The Fruitful Darkness* by Joan Halifax]

Part of the lesson being captured here is the fact that every living being leaves behind ripples, like a stone dropped in a pond, that can never be fully erased. Furthermore, consider Forrest Church's assertion that "The one thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die." What does that mean for those of us left behind? It means that we still have that love that they gave us before they died, and that can never be taken away. Our loved ones live on indeed in our hearts, in our memories, and in the love that they shared with us.

Another lofty and abstract way of addressing the challenge of loss is to acknowledge the pain that comes with loss, but to reassure ourselves that, in the end, it's worth it. It's the idea that "it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Forrest Church made this point in the reading earlier when he wrote that "Since the most precious and enduring lifework is signed by love, to avoid the risk of love is to cower from life's only perfect promise."

Another expression of this idea that the pain of death may actually be worth it is found in the poem, "The Cost", by Dorothy N. Monroe. She writes:

Death is not too high a price to pay
For having lived. Mountains never die,
Nor do the seas or rocks or endless sky.
Through countless centuries of time, they stay
Eternal, deathless. Yet they never live!
If choice there were, I would not hesitate
To choose mortality. Whatever Fate
Demanded in return for life I'd give,
For never to have seen the fertile plains
Nor heard the winds nor felt the warm sun on sands
Beside the salty sea, nor touched the hands
Of those I love – without these, all the gains
Of timelessness would not be worth one day
Of living and of loving; come what may.

In this view, not only the deaths of those we love, but even our own deaths are small prices to pay for the precious gift of being able to live a life in this world. But in order to be worth that cost, we must strive to achieve that purpose laid out in Forrest Church's final mantra: "to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for."

Remember the story I told last week? About Joseph, who lived his life with an adventurous "Why not?" attitude? At the end of a long and satisfying life, when it came

time for Joseph to die, it was sad. But not as sad as it could have been. Because everyone, especially those who loved Joseph the most, knew that Joseph had *lived* his life.

So we can console ourselves somewhat with the notion that, somehow, our loved ones live on in us and around us. We can take some comfort in the idea that life, even with its inherent pain and loss, is worth the cost. But the fact is that when we lose a loved one, something is gone. We have lost something. Our lives are just not the same without the presence of our loved ones, and that's the simple truth. Loss is inevitable. Loss brings change. Change is hard for most people, and the first response of many of us is to avoid the pain of change. One important lesson that can help us stand up in the face of such a difficult challenge is to understand that we have the necessary strength and endurance to survive the changes and losses that confront us.

Part of that strength and endurance comes from that deep place that some of us call faith. The faith that no matter how hard things get, they will eventually get easier. Faith that this, too, shall pass. This isn't necessarily faith that everything will be wonderful, and will turn out exactly as we wish it to. Rather, it's faith that however things turn out, we will be able to endure, and make the best of what comes. And we may even gain valuable insights and skills in the process. In the process of rewriting our future story, we may find once more, new sources of meaning and joy in our lives.

One more important lesson about loss and grief is that it needn't be suffered alone. As I said in our meditation this morning, grief shared is grief diminished. Silence hurts, and as a religious community, it is our responsibility to one another to be there and to break the silence, and provide our loving support. That's not always comfortable. Often, a fear of saying the wrong thing, and causing even more pain, keeps us from saying anything at all. And the fear is not entirely unfounded, as illustrated by the poem, "Unsolicited Advice" found in Earl A. Grollman's excellent book, *Living When a Loved One Has Died*.

Everyone knows what is best for you.
People offer words of consolation:

"I know just how you feel."

You want to scream: "No you don't!

How can you possibly know what I'm going through?"

"You are doing so well."

"Do you know how I feel when you leave?"

"Your loved one lived to a ripe old age."

"At any age death is a robber."

"Others have lived through it."

"I'm not concerned about others.

At this moment I'm concerned about myself."

"It's God's will."

“Then this vindictive and vengeful
God must be my enemy.”

Your heart is breaking – and they offer you clichés.

You see, they are frightened, too.
They feel threatened and ill at ease.
But they are sharing as best they can.

Accept their companionship, but you
need not take their advice.

You may simply say, “Thank you for coming.”

And then do what is best for you.

So you may say the wrong thing. You may not be able to “fix” someone else’s pain. But even so, your presence – your being there, walking through the nettles together – is still better than not being there. And there are some simple guidelines that can help you avoid the most unhelpful comments, such as those in the poem.

Dr. Carroll Saussy, the instructor of my seminary class on “Death and Dying” provided some helpful advice for supporting the bereaved. This included, in part, the following:

Your presence and interest can be vitally important to the bereaved. Find out whether the person would like you to visit and when. Be yourself with the person, letting your own tears flow, paying attention to what is going on inside you and open to whatever emotions or thoughts the bereaved wants to share, without criticism or correction. Let silences be, no matter how uncomfortable you may feel.

Some helpful questions or conversation starters:

- Tell me about your relationship to your lost loved one.
- If you could speak to your loved one, what would you want to say?
- What might be most helpful to you right now?
- What do you find yourself thinking about?
- What is your worst fear?

Probably the most helpful thing you can do is to LISTEN! There is no one right way to grieve, and there is no set timetable for the process. Everyone reacts to loss in a unique way, depending on his or her personality, loss history, coping styles, family culture, and religious beliefs. So again, the best thing you can do is listen, acknowledge whatever feelings are expressed, and be there to do what might be asked of you.

In closing this morning, I want to return to Forrest Church's last mantra about living in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. Within this statement lies the recognition that in living well, we are preparing to die well. My friend and colleague Fred Muir, in his book *Heretics' Faith* suggests that "we each have three wishes at our death," and that "they give direction for living well. That is to say, they are death wishes that must be acted out in life." Fred writes:

First, at your death you would hope that your friends and family, those here and those you've had contact with over your life, would know what you meant by your life...

A second wish: that when you die, you would hope that you'd make a difference, that you had left behind something of yourself that had made a difference...

Finally, a third wish: that those you love not be confused or hurt, but ready to carry on in your absence with courage and fortitude.

So if you want your dying wishes to come true: Live what you mean. Share yourself with other people so as to make a positive difference in their lives. And do what you can to take care of unfinished business. To tie up loose ends with those of your family and friends that may have unresolved issues or difficulties.

And finally I leave you with the words of Forrest Church, the words with which he closes his book, *Love & Death*:

Go forth into this fragile, blessed world we share with laughter and tears at the ready. Love, work, and serve to a fare-thee-well. And then, when your own time comes, let go. Let go for dear life.

So may it be.