

“Naming our Losses”

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We are in the middle of a serious summer series. Grief, loss, struggles. Being human. “When Steeples Cry: leading Congregations through loss and change”, (Hamman, 2005) is a book written by one of my seminary professors. It’s a guide for doing the work of grief and mourning on personal and communal levels. He assumes, in this book that churches are “paying the spiritual, emotional, and relational cost of loss and change”.

To refresh, in case you weren’t here last week- grief is the normal reaction to the experience of loss and change. Mourning is the intentional process of letting go of the past and making room for a new way of understanding.

Dr. H describes the “Multi-faceted nature of loss”:

- Material losses
- Relational losses
- Intra psychic losses
- Functional losses
- Role losses

All the struggles we have effect body, mind and spirit. We know that, we’ve experienced that. But many of us were carefully taught to deny our feelings and move quickly through any grief. Mourning our losses, doing that intentional work is covertly or even overtly discouraged, even though healing is facilitated by talking. If we simply say “tomorrow is a new day” like Scarlet O’Hara, and don’t acknowledge our pain, we will have all the more trouble in finding healthy new ways to be whole in body, mind and spirit.

Today we look at the experience of a woman at the time of Christ. The apocryphal writing The “Acts of Pilate” names the woman from this account *Veronica*. I don’t know if that was really her name, but what a stark contrast. Beautiful name, terrible situation. Multiple losses.

It intrigues me that this account is seen as important; enough to be included in the NT. It’s in the 3 synoptic gospels. This is very frank, and isn’t it interesting that it was included for us? A woman with “female trouble” goes to Jesus! I’ve had male pastor friends tell me that this passage is HARD for them to speak about. I suppose it’s cultural and frame of reference.

Consider-

This woman was in a terrible physical state. She was severely anemic, suffering from not having enough healthy blood in her body. Losing blood makes a person weak, exhausted, short of breath and prone to many other problems. It is safe to say that this woman is very ill, maybe close to death.

“She suffered a great deal under many physicians.” There’s no gynecologist to call. No “Women’s health” specialists. No hysterectomy or hormone therapy. Here’s what extra-biblical literature from this time period says they did have for treatment of this type of bleeding. Drinking wine with boiled onions. Standing, straddling smoldering vines. And some things with mud and manure...

She went to many doctors. They didn’t make her better. The text says she grew worse. Her physical condition causes so many other struggles, too.

Socially, emotionally things are tough. It says in verse 26 “She spent all she had”. All SHE had. It sounds like she has no family to support her. She probably is not young if she’s been bleeding for 12 years, perhaps her parents are not around or alive. If she HAD been married, she probably isn’t now, as she could not have any marital relationship, when she was bleeding. That would make her and her husband continuously unclean. Certainly she is not able to do much work to support herself financially, if she is anemic and exhausted. So financially she is at the end of her resources. No money, no support, no potential for earning; not a good situation. We know in healthcare that the social factors are very important in persons’ health and well-being. They usually get listed along with the physical and mental health concerns, in the person’s diagnosis.

And she is in a poor place spiritually. If the community is following the Levitical laws, it sounds as if they were, she was not allowed to worship with the people. This is spelled out in Leviticus 15. A person, a woman who was bleeding was unclean and could not enter the place of worship. It even says that anything she sits on is “unclean”, and anyone who touches anything she touches is “unclean”. This status in effect “for as long as she is bleeding”. So for 12 years this woman was considered unclean! She could not be in contact with the rabbi or the holy places.

Fortunately someone cares enough to tell her about the miracle working prophet, or maybe she just over heard it at the well, about the one who is healing people of their diseases. But since she hears he is doing astonishing things she believes he has magical power.

She goes to him in the crowd. She knows she should not be in contact with this amazing rabbi called Jesus, but she touches Jesus’ robe; and he knows it. She knows she is healed. Can you picture it? There is a huge crowd, walking with Jesus, They are en route to the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. So the disciples laugh at Jesus! “You see all these people and yet you wonder who touched you?” She is afraid, -has she made this special rabbi unclean? What has happened to her? What will happen next?

Jesus stops to talk to her. And she told him the whole truth. There on that road, she

tells all to the one who cares. She shared the whole story of the physical and social and spiritual trouble she had been living with for the past 12 years. Jesus calls her “daughter”, and reminds her that this wasn’t magic, but the power of her faith in him. “Go in peace”. I’m pretty sure she did.

We understand opening the heart and telling the whole story of our hurt to Jesus. “He is our peace” (Eph 2:14). We generally trust that God is “only a prayer away”.

But would we do what she did? Look at the context. There on the road, she is surrounded by a crowd, maybe no one there that she knew; surrounded by Jesus’ (critical) disciples and Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue. There, in front of all those people she told her story.

A few years back I preached at a church. A man and 2 women were having a pleasant conversation at the coffee time after the services. They invited me to join them. One woman smiled at the other couple and said “I used to feel so lonely at this church. I never would tell anyone my story. My son is in prison. I was so ashamed. Then this good couple, bravely talked about how their son is in jail. I realized that I wasn’t so alone after all.” And so she told them the whole truth.

I am not saying you need to stand up here and describe all your losses. But do any of your brothers and sisters in Christ know the grief that you are coping with?

- The deaths and the dreams that are gone;
- the losses in regard to physical things,
- social or emotional things;
- the spiritual struggles that you face?

Do you tell the truth when someone here asks you “How are you?”

You know by now that I don’t get agitated very easily. If I ask you how you are doing and you say “fine”, but *nothing* is “fine” I probably will be angry with you! I’m here to hear the truth. Our Stephen Ministers are here to hear. Your friends at church are following God’s laws when they want to offer support, as you mourn. The commandments of God, Jesus said are summed up in the words “Love God, love your neighbor, Love yourself.” And maybe you know the verse: Galatians 6:2 “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Stuffing our feelings often leads us to become passive-aggressive people. We say we are coping well but our tempers flare up for odd reasons. That is not a good way to have a healthy community of faith.

Maybe you don’t want the whole church to know your troubles. OK, I understand that,

too. But, tell the people in your circle or Bible study or Sunday School class. Inquire of each other after worship. Or maybe go to lunch or call on the phone. Tell the whole story. And let others help you carry your burden. Have honest open communication and discussion with each other. That means both talking and listening. We are “bound together by faith, not by experience”. (Bonhoeffer, 39)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor, leader and martyr in the Nazi resistance movement, wrote in his book *Life Together*, that listening is “the ‘first service’ members of the body of Christ should offer each other”. Bonhoeffer states, that people are “looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, for these Christians are talking where they should be listening’.” (83)

We need to listen, learn to hear the stories of our brothers and sisters here, in this church and also in this community. I think that’s what the sacred conversations about race were- a way to listen for meaning. To value the past for all it means, understand the present by how it is formed from the past, and find ways to live into new visions for a future that proves we are followers of Christ, the One who stopped to listen even though he had other tasks at hand. I think Christ is teaching that caring for people is our priority.

And in my chaplain training we were often reminded that what we talked about as individuals was really something we needed to talk about as a group. We need to continue to talk about our lives together. We need to continue the task of telling our stories of loss and grief. We are in this together.

I haven’t seen a prayer request card come through the system in a long time. But know that the staff of this church does pray for you. We are planning a service of healing to be held the first Sunday of each month, between services.

Dr. Hamman taught me to listen to the concerns of the people. Sometimes I am “preaching to the choir”, you know how to admit your struggles and you know how to listen to those around you. Sometimes. But sometimes I am preaching to you. And if the shoe fits....

AMEN