

July 5, 2009 Living means losing
Scripture: Rev. 21 1-5
Rev. Pat Weatherwax

One of my most favorite seminary professors was Dr. Jaco Hamman. He was the professor for pastoral care and counseling, my favorite subjects. Dr. Hamman is a white South African, and can pray in a language that sounds half-way between Dutch and some African dialect, which is what it is-Afrikaans. He especially understands the impact of change in churches- the ending of apartheid, even though it was a good thing, rocked the community of faith where he grew up. He knows and we know- change is hard and loss is permanent.

After I graduated from Western Seminary in Holland MI, Dr. Hamman wrote a book for pastors. Reading his book is like hearing him speak, but only to readers like me who know his accent.

“When Steeples Cry: Leading congregations through loss and change” Interesting title. I understand that a few years ago there was some conflict within this body. I really haven’t heard a full explanation of the reasons, but I don’t care to. I’ve been involved in enough church conflict in other places. It’s been said that “for every action there is an equal and opposite criticism.” In a church it’s painful and ugly and probably often not very Christ-like.

Like the places I’ve been before, with any change or conflict, including the one you had here, there comes some losses. With every loss comes grief. Living is dangerous business. Living means losing. There is no escape from grief and loss.

Dr. Hamman defines grief as: “the normal emotional, spiritual, physical and relational reaction to the experience of loss and change.” (p.12)

I know there was grieving here. What I’m not sure is if you made room for the work of mourning. Dr. H. Defined mourning, as “the intentional process of letting go of relationships, dreams, and visions”. In personal life and in congregational life, mourning is when you intentionally live “ into a new identity after the experience of loss and change.” (13)

He goes on to say:

“With God present in our losses, mourning becomes a creative force that not only heals, restores, and revitalizes, but also anticipates a new future.” (28) He says mourning is a way to create “space to grow” (29). But it requires work and conscious effort, or else grief creeps back to sabotage

other relationships, and our dreams and hopes for the future.

That's why I read the passage from Rev. 21 this morning. This text, my favorite commentary says, describes "the fulfillment of all human dreams for the community and security of life in an ideal city". (Interp. Rev. p. 214) And while we can't have heaven on earth, we are people of God living in a world already redeemed by Christ for us and for our salvation, but not yet "all it will be" when it is made new. The "already, not yet". We live in the in-between times!

And even now God is with us. Elvis Presley, and others sang "He's Only a Prayer Away". The Psalms, old songs as they are, can comfort us and remind us that God is there. They also help us lament the struggles in our lives:

Psalm 34:18 - "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Don't we just wish it said "God always keeps us from being brokenhearted"? And "God prevents our spirits from ever being crushed"? God can. God doesn't. God won't. Ouch. That's theodicy, defined:

"God is good and just, even in the face of the existence of evil and trouble." "The LORD is near."

But grief and loss are also always near us. Different struggles hit us different ways. Losses of individuals, families, and gospel communities- whole churches are dying. We are *blessed* to have each other to lean on and to love.

(With permission...)

Let me tell you about my friend- "you can call him Ray". He's one of those people that seem to have had more than his share of pain in life. A sister with severe medical and mental disabilities, he married young, and had 2 divorces- one wife was unfaithful with his "best" friend. He battled addictions.

Life sort of settled down for a while. He married a friend of mine and renewed his relationship with God.

Then came *the* year. Maybe as close to hell on earth as possible. His young adult son was killed in a car crash on an icy night, the other driver was drunk. A few months later, *another* son died during a surgery that went

terribly wrong. Shortly after that his father, not an old man, died after a massive heart attack. That year of grief was simply horrid for him and his family.

Then Ray started having his own health problems. Rheumatoid arthritis over took his body. He became unable to work; the loss of his income and his insurance led him to postpone needed surgery, so now he battles recurring melanoma. Financial distress led to a bankruptcy. Conflict in his church, with many long-time friends choosing to worship elsewhere, was just one more grief, in the past few years.

Mourning, conflicts, and medical disability can lead you to do some unusual things. ☺ Ray volunteers for a hospice. He recently was the driving force for opening a food bank at his home church. He coordinates the Angel Food program there, too. He sings in the choir, praising God; he's a deacon. To supplement his disability income, when he's physically able he drives a limousine. He's a cheerful face helping wedding parties and prom kids to have great, safe celebrations. He says his church family has been his primary support group.

You know, he doesn't blame God. He credits God with giving him the strength to cope. I'm not sure that I could survive; Ray *lives* with his losses. He did the important work of mourning his losses, and still has hope. We all face losses. Of all kinds. "Multi-faceted nature of loss":

- Material losses- our personal and church budgets have taken harsh hits.
- Relational losses- we've lost people we've loved, to death, divorce and to transfers of membership.
- Intra psychic losses- Just who are we? What are our thoughts about ourselves? We change when we are doing the work of mourning.
- Functional losses- In our church we have lost co-workers, musicians, recently our Christian Ed director. Others can do those jobs, but the loss of the person remains even if and when their shoes are filled.
- Role changes- In marriage when you lose your spouse you lose your partner. Who takes out the garbage if the missing spouse always did that? Now it's your role.

Change and loss. All this is true and all needs to be considered and addressed, not ignored. That's why it's called "grief work".

In the weeks to come we will examine ways to do that work. We'll see how

talking helps, how worshiping helps, and how having compassion for others, helps us as individuals and as a body of believers. This is just the beginning- seeing just how prevalent loss and grief are for all of us. Birth and death, human condition. How often in families do we see the joyous birth of a baby coming in tandem with the death of a family matriarch or patriarch? How often when we celebrate a wedding are we also mourning someone else's divorce? How do we rejoice with those who rejoice and at the same time weep with those who weep? One gets a promotion and another is laid off. Grief happens. We know we are powerless when we try to control the future and to obtain life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We don't know what the future holds. Do we know who holds the future?

So Dr. Hamman asks, and since I'm new around here I wonder, too: What comes next? Who are we? "Who are we as the body of Christ at this time in our specific context?" (55)

What do we need to mourn? What work is left undone as we try to be God's church in Battle Creek MI, in the summer of 2009. How do we live into our mission statement that "First Presbyterian Church exists to share God's love and grace with all people and celebrate the truth of Jesus Christ." How do we have: "A Heart for God in the Heart of the City"? How do we heal our own hearts, considering that we have losses and struggles ourselves? How do we "CELEBRATE" the truth of God when we are grieving?

A verse I often use with people in fresh grief, from I Thes. 4:13: "do not grieve as others do, who have no hope." It doesn't say DON'T GRIEVE. But we try to constantly renew our sense of hope. We always have our God and even when it seems like life is the hardest, Christians have hope. Not hope for a return of the glory days of old, or the re-creation of the past. Not a replacement of those we've lost, but a "new creation", a new time when God will be with us and will wipe our tears and hold us close and encourage us to mourn our losses. To be better, not bitter.

The apostle Paul says it better, and Eugene Peterson's Message paraphrase makes it simple for us, here and now.-

(Romans 8: 26-39, selected verses from *The Message*)

“Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. God does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. God knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. ...

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture... None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. “

Do we as believers get a picture perfect world? NO. We often get grief. We get loss we struggle and cry, grieve and mourn. And we have hope. That somehow we are loved by God, and in turn we will love the broken people in the broken world around us.

To the glory of God. AMEN.