

“Great Losses”

Sermon given by The Rev. Joe Summers at the Church of the Incarnation on March 30th, 2008.
(Gospel for the 2nd Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31)

“Wait for the Lord. God’s Day is near. Wait for the Lord. Be Strong. Rejoice”

-Taize Hymn

What do we do with great grief, with the great losses we as human beings experience in the course of our lives?

I’ve found myself wrestling with that question all week since I heard a lecture from Geof Eley about the world we have lost since 1985. It was a world that sustained him, gave him hope and a purpose in life. Geof grew up a working class kid in England whose life was totally different than it would have been because of the democratic socialist movement that came to power in England and throughout Europe following WW II. It was a movement that believed our societies could be fundamentally better. Now the mass popular base of those movements is gone as a result of de-industrialization, privatization, and mass-market consumer culture. Gone with it is the movement that led to major improvements in life for so many over the last 100 years, the movement that gave people mechanisms to express their hopes and desires and that held government and businesses accountable for their actions. But Geof’s lecture was not a call to be nostalgic about this past, to fall into the trap of thinking it can somehow be re-created. It was a call to honor the past in part by recognizing that it is gone and by boldly facing the present so we can create a different future.

Geof’s talk reminded me of the millions of people around the world who gave their lives to such movements and now live in a time where all sorts of things that governments once provided, like full employment or economic democracy, are now considered utopian. What a terrible grief to give your life for something only to feel like what you gave your life for went up in a puff of smoke.

For my parents the city was always the symbol of the heights of human culture, the dream of diverse community, and yet most of my life has been lived watching that dream devolve as one urban area after another in this country has been destroyed by policy and neglect. How many of our citizens now live in areas, urban and rural, where they are continually reminded of a community and quality of life that no longer exists?

But that’s only one kind of grief. The older I get the more griefs I discover people have to live with every day: the loss of one who was so vital to you that it was like a part of you died when they died, the loss of a relationship you dreamed would sustain you through your life, the loss of a dream--a vision you had for your life or your career--what you hoped to do in the world, the terrible disappointments many of us have to live with regarding what has happened to us in our lives, how we’ve been treated, or how we’ve treated others. I went through the Prison Creative Arts Project Art show that’s on North Campus right now and, in painting after painting, I was

struck by my sense of the soul of an artist who has had to deal with profound loss. For most of us--the question of how we live with great loss--is one of the most central questions in our lives. We have much to learn from those who have survived the loss of almost everything: nature, fresh air, family, the world--and yet have learned to continue in faith. I think it's also why my older sisters and brothers are such a sustaining presence for me because they've learned to keep on keeping on despite experiencing such losses.

And yet it seems like most of the time our culture encourages us to avoid facing our losses. I see so many withdrawing into various ism's to avoid dealing with the reality of their lives. Over the last seven years I've seen a kind of unraveling of community that I suspect has been related to grief over September 11th and the nightmarish policies, such as the war in Iraq, that found their justification in it, and the kind of loss of faith which is reflected in the kind of crass cronyism, cynicism and political ineptitude embodied in the failure to prepare for Hurricane Katrina or to deal effectively with its aftermath.

I've seen people who used to sustain each other, and are now no longer there for each other.

Some retreat into individualism. It's the oldest game in the world: "I can't worry about anyone but myself. Am I my brother's or sister's keeper?" No, but you are your brother's brother and your sister's sister!

Some retreat into privatism: the withdrawal into self or family. How can you argue with people who claim they are doing something because it is good for them or their family?

Some retreat into consumerism. There is now such an ongoing line of new gadgets, with 200 channels or more with which you can now be endlessly distracted.

I've seen the retreat into professionalism, one of the few places where you can retreat and it still looks like you are being responsible.

But every week I'm confronted with the price of this retreat: people so overwhelmed and lonely they are falling into, or back into, addiction, despair, delusional thinking (when we are isolated it's almost impossible to stay clear minded), broken relationships, hardened hearts.

If we don't deal with our great losses--they tend to possess us.

I want to note here how many recent films seem to be focused on this theme, including two of the leading contenders for best picture. *No Country for Old Men* is partly about feeling so cut off from the world you knew and loved that it feels like there is no longer room for you in this world. *There Will be Blood* seems in part about the demonic nature of what we have called progress and the bloody insanity that comes to possess those who won't deal with their grief.

And that's where we meet the disciples today. They are behind closed, locked doors. Maybe

it's simply because they are afraid of the authorities and the mob, but I think it is also symbolic of their great grief: the terrible loss they suffered in seeing their beloved teacher and leader publicly humiliated and killed, their great anger at having watched themselves do nothing either to stop it or even just to stay by Jesus through his suffering, their bitter disappointment in having seen how far they are from who they thought they were or hoped they were, their despair that they will never see the new world Jesus promised to lead them into. And so they are hiding in their grief, their shame and anger, their bitter disappointment and despair.

Wait for the Lord, God's Day is near, Wait for the Lord, Be Strong, Rejoice!

In A Grief Observed, CS Lewis wrote that great grief produces a kind of terrible constriction, tightness, of the heart. Those locked doors are symbolic of a community whose hearts are closed in grief, fear, shame, anger, disappointment and despair. But somehow, the Risen Jesus comes through those locked doors. Experiencing his presence again, the disciples feel peace. They feel forgiven. They experience the power to forgive. Touching the wounds of Jesus they find in themselves strength, joy, and courage rather than fear, guilt and shame. Isn't touching the wounds about our need to revisit our sorrows so they don't just putrefy beneath the surface?

The church is the assembly of those who are called out, called out from the tomb, called out from behind the locked doors of grief, fear, shame, guilt, and anger, called out to go forth into the world to bring the power to start anew, to give people the chance to begin again, not from the beginning but from where they are and from that place--to help make the world anew.

Church happens when people gather in truth and let the Spirit make them into a heart. That's what hopefully happens here on Sunday mornings, God making us into a heart through which we can love and care for others, ourselves, the world and God. But, we cannot be part of the heart of the world if we are disconnected. If we don't deal with our great grief we'll simply stay stuck in our losses. To be part of the heart of the world, we need the Holy Spirit to give us courage to begin to face our losses, to not be so afraid of them, to help us not be so overwhelmed by our anger at others and ourselves about them, to not let that anger and fear and despair define our lives and our selves. We need the Holy Spirit to take our great losses, and all the feelings we have about them, and transform them so that, rather than a source of stuckness and isolation, they become a source of healing and connection to others.

In my experience, again and again, you discover that most of those who love most profoundly, most truly, have experienced great, great losses, but something has happened so that they were able to make those losses become a source of healing energy and passion for justice. Often they can't tell you how, why, or when, but our Gospel today says that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. So often we learn that the one who is so great at accepting and affirming others--grew up feeling enormously judged; the one who creates such a sense of warm hospitality and home--grew up feeling alone and isolated; the one who helps others find their voice--grew up silenced; the one who connects people to each other--grew up paralyzingly shy, the one who knows the pain of mental illness; helps bring mental health to all. It goes on and on. Our great

griefs, our great losses, can keep us living behind closed doors, or they can become something the Holy Spirit transforms into sources of life, the leaves that heal the nations.

In the beginning of the Book of Acts we hear that the same group of isolated, cut off, disciples we encounter at the beginning of John's Gospel today have become one, in heart and soul, sharing everything, giving everything; they are a living testimony to the resurrection. They have created a great collective heart space within which everything possessed is given, everything needed is received.

That's what this assembly can be, if we are willing to let ourselves face our grief and open ourselves to our losses and let God transform them into sources of healing life and justice.

The road is not easy. The pain of great losses seems unbearable and for many of us it never seems to go away. But God promises to help us bear the unbearable and there is also great comfort, great joy, great strength, in no longer hiding, in no longer living alone, in discovering the companionship, friendships and love that blossom on this path.

And if we are willing God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare the way for us.