

# **Grief as a Privilege**

## **April 14, 2013**

### **Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini**

**Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:**

We are here,  
*to continue to open and blossom,*  
as the magnolias, lilacs and daffodils of spring,  
*becoming exactly who we are at our best*  
while never denying our fragility,  
*and our need for each other and the earth itself.*

And so...

**Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.**

**Singing: #196 Singer of Life**

**Ingathering:**

There once were two trees in a forest who grew close to each other and who liked each other a lot. You could call them friends, I suppose, if you can call trees friends.

They were very different. One was an evergreen, a spruce tree. When the winter would come with its snow and cold wind, the evergreen would stay green and bright. The evergreen was quite young, only about 25 years old. His friend, the Oaktree, was much older, almost 90. The Oaktree was not always green. In the fall, his leaves will turn orange and then brown, and acorns will fall to the ground. In the winter, Oaktree has no color at all. But in the spring, Oaktree always started to send out little green shoots, which gradually unrolled into beautiful green leaves. Spruce tree, the evergreen, didn't even have leaves, just soft needle-like things poking out like a hairbrush from its branches.

The two trees were quite different from each other. But they were good friends. The older tree would tell the younger tree stories that made it laugh or even cry sometimes from laughing so hard. The young evergreen tree would ask questions when he got serious, getting the older tree to talk about what the forest had been like before he was born. They really enjoyed their time together.

When fall came one year, it was just like any other fall. The older Oaktree's leaves turned various colors, then brown, then slowly dropped off and were blown away by the wind. The last acorn fell to the ground and rolled into a crack in the soil nearby, and the Oaktree stopped talking for

the winter like he usually did. But the Spruce tree happily waited out the winter knowing that spring was around the corner, and Oaktree would grow new green leaves, and start talking again. But March came, then April, and then May, and the old Oaktree just stayed the same...no new leaves, no new acorns. Finally Spruce tree realized that his friend had come to the end of his life...most Oaktrees last at most a hundred years. So for the whole rest of May, and all of June, and most of July, Spruce tree was very sad. He missed his friend very much. But one day he noticed that a little shoot of green was coming up from the crack in the ground where the acorn had fallen. In just a few years, it was a small tree. It wasn't his friend...but it was a new Oaktree. And as the young Oaktree grew higher and higher next to the Spruce tree, guess who got to be the best of friends?

## **Greeting**

## **Affirming**

**But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say "yes" to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is reunited with itself.** *Paulus Tillich 1955*

## **Singing #6 Just as Long As I Have Breath**

### **Communing:**

I wonder what it's like to live so much right now  
that tomorrow isn't even a idea in my head?  
To live as if this moment is all I have,  
here, me sounding words in this pulpit,  
with all of you listening in, or sitting more  
attentively, or wondering where I am going with this?

I wonder what it would be like if I acted as if this air I breathe is the only air I'll ever know? This light coming through the windows, the only light I'll ever see? The people around me the only people? This carpeted wooden floor I am standing on, the only floor? Neither birth nor death are here in this moment...just this very moment, where nothing is expected, and where memories fade as I am aware of just this second, and this one, and this one, this singular breathing in and out which will never again be repeated, and which resembles nothing but itself.

I wonder, what it's like to not only live right now, but to actually give up even these very words I'm speaking, words that are pretending to grab this singular moment as if it could be captured once and for all, as if it will not slip like quicksilver through the minute cracks of silence between them...

Ah, but guess what? It's time not to wonder anymore what it would be like to let go of it all. It's time to do just that... let it all go...and be here.....

## *silence*

And still, the silence is never really silent, is it, filled as it is with intruding memories and anticipations, admittedly another way of being human just as sacred as the lingering silence. And so, opening into this way of understanding, may we name quietly in our hearts, or whisper by our lips, the names of all those whose faces rise before the mystery of our inner heart: those who have loved us either beautifully or awkwardly, those whom we miss because they were once a part of our lives and are no more, those we mourn, and even those whom we are still trying to figure out how to love. In this sacred human place, we name them.

## *naming*

This moment is blest by the choir that usually sings at the other service. For the congregation is one, even as this moment is singular, and each breath is singular. Blest is this moment.

**The first reading** is called *The Cure* by the late Albert Huffstickler, who included it in his chapbook, titled *Wanda*, 1988

We think we get over things.  
We don't get over things.  
Or say, we get over the measles  
But not a broken heart.  
We need to make that distinction.  
The things that become a part of our experience  
Never become less a part of our experience.  
How can I say it?

The way to get over a life is to die.  
Short of that, you move with it.  
Let the pain be the pain  
not in the hope that it will vanish  
But in the faith that it will fit in.  
And be then not any less pain but true to form.  
Because anything natural has an  
inherent shape and will flow towards it.  
And a life is as natural as a leaf.  
That's what we're looking for:  
not the end of a thing  
but the shape of it.

**The second reading** comes from a rather gothic novel written by Mary Stewart back in 1958, before they were very popular.

Have you ever thought, when something dreadful happens, "A moment ago, things were not like this: let it be *then*, not now.... anything but *now*"? And so you try and remake *then*, but you

know you can't. So you try and hold the moment quite still, and not *let* it move on, and show itself.

## **Preaching: The Privilege of Grief**

When you enter the front doors of this building, you will find some elegant teal-colored letters greeting you up on the wall above the kiosk that gives you the list of what's going on in this place. These letters make up the four assertions of our congregational Mission Statement. It was crafted over a good period of time by a whole host of members. Last week I brought my friend Joshua over to see this beautiful building that is our common home, and he stopped immediately to read the Statement. He took his time...and clearly he was moved, since he said to me when he was done, "That is deep...that is remarkably deep."

I loved it that he said that.

The Mission is on the back of the Order of Celebration if you missed it on your way in.

There is one word and one phrase I want to lift up this morning from that Mission Statement. You may have noticed that I titled my sermon this morning, "The Privilege of Grief." Let me unpack that a bit. The word privilege is ancient. It hasn't really changed much since it was the Latin word "privilegium." Back then, it meant "a private law applying to only one person," the first part of the word giving us our English word "private." And the second part of the word giving us our English word "legal." Privilege meant that you were special, and could have things apply to you that applied to no one else. Like the Emperor for example. It was against the law to kill people in ancient Rome as it is now. But the Emperor was privileged not to have to follow that law if he didn't want to.

Now this meaning...law that applies to one, or just a few...is the first of its meanings, certainly, the one we meant when we wrote our Mission. After all, we have grown aware that there are many laws, written and unwritten, which apply to some people and not to others. The whole civil rights movement was about laws and advantages which applied to Euro-American people, that did not apply to African-rooted people, or Native peoples. Men were allowed to do things women were not allowed to do. Straight folks had marriage advantages over gay and lesbian folks, etc. Our Mission statement asks those who are part of this congregation to relinquish the easy safety of those advantages so that, by examining ourselves deeply first, we might actually and honestly further justice for all people.

My friend Joshua was right. It is a deep statement.

But privilege has another meaning. It also means something that can apply to anyone, not just the self-exalted few. It means "a special gift," or "good fortune" as in the sentence, "It's been a privilege to spend time with you, my friend." Not because you're the Emperor or a famous movie star, but because you are you, whoever you are.

This is what I mean by the title of today's talk, the Privilege of Grief.

I think that to engage in grief is a special gift we all are given, each of us, a good fortune we all can share. I really resonate with the way David Richo puts it. Grief (or mourning as he says it) "is what "Yes" looks like when we face the conditions of existence with feeling. Since every one of the givens in life represents a loss, grief work is a skillful means with which to face them all."

I'll unpack that more later.

Besides the word *privilege*, I want to lift up the third affirmation in our Mission Statement in its entirety. We state that "we claim our diversity as a source of our strength."

And so it is that we spend a lot of time around here...in sermons, small group ministries, committees, justice work and education...lifting up the strengths that are inherent in diversity. We lift up diverse gender understandings, diverse cultures, colors and ethnicities, diverse sexual orientations and presentations, diverse theology, diverse opinions on this or that, diverse classes, abilities, talents and energies. This is important, life changing work, I think.

But this morning I'd like to suggest that one of the most important diversities we can lift up...and don't always...will be to lift up the diversity of our different expressions of grief. Like all mammals, we grieve...it's in our system. But we are the ones who have the gift of language as well; we are the ones who recognize it as a great honor, a terrific gift, a good fortune.

As Richo points out (and here I am unpacking his fine statement that I quoted earlier...), there is really no way to avoid receiving the gift. He points out that all the givens of life...health, station, status, looks, family, ability and even life itself...all point to their own end in loss. It's just the way the world is. No one has yet come up with any exceptions, at least without making a specific theological statement. Even the lovely story I told to the kids this morning, about the Oaktree and the Spruce, accepts the reality of the way the world is.

Yes, it's certainly possible to react with panic to this reality, to respond with desperation, and pretend that this is not so, hoping against hope that everything, and everyone, and every moment can be preserved, yanked back, restored to what it used to be, etc. But in the entire history of humanity, it has never happened that I know of. Even the famous Easter stories, which speak of a man who comes back to life from death, insist it's *not* the SAME life. Before he died, people recognized him. "Hey, there's Jesus!" The stories speaking about his life *after* his resurrection always point out that *no one* recognizes him. Before he died, he never walked through walls. After he was restored, the stories say, he could. Clearly, even the most orthodox interpretations of those stories deny that he was *exactly* the same person as before.

Mary Stewart addresses this reality in her novel. "Have you ever thought, when something dreadful happens, 'A moment ago, things were not like this: let it be *then*, not now.... anything but *now*'? And so you try and remake *then*, but you know you can't. So you try and hold the moment quite still, and not *let* it move on, and show itself."

Letting the moment move on.

This is the privilege of grief.  
Letting the moment, the loss,  
show itself for what it is.  
This is the privilege of grief.

Stewart's words sum mourning up beautifully for me. And I have to imagine she's talking about grief for every loss. Loss of loved one. Loss of job. Loss of health. Loss of expectations. Loss of place. Loss of community. Every loss has to show itself, she says. Every moment has to move on.

But letting grief flow forward does not mean forgetting, or acting as if nothing happened. Albert Huffstickler's poem makes this point almost without mercy, it's so direct. So clear and clean.  
*We think we get over things.*  
*We don't get over things.*      Amen to that.

Seventeen years after my best friend Stefan died, I still light the *yahrzeit* (year anniversary) candle on the anniversary of his death. His photo is the first thing I see when I sit down at my desk. I hung his portrait up so that would be so. I think of him often, with love, with gratitude, and sometimes with quiet tears.

On the day he died, however, 17 years ago, my emotions flowed more freely. Or better, more jaggedly. At the hospital, a nurse came in to tell Richard, his partner, and me that our crying, our wailing, was scaring other people on the ward. Richard looked up with veins in his eyes. I said to him, "I'll handle it." I told the nurse with scarcely contained anger: "Look, this man, a person we loved for many, many years, just died. Our tears and our wailing are appropriate to this event. It's how Richard and I begin our grieving. If it frightens people down the hall, I cannot be concerned about that. Let them be afraid of whatever it is they are frightened of. Frankly, right now, they are not my concern." She blanched a bit, said nothing, and left.

Later, we told what happened to the rabbi. He said, "I would have said the same thing. You were each officially an *onen* then." "An *onen*?" I asked. "Yes, a person in initial grief, which we call the *aninut* time, which lasts until the burial. You are in shock, you are rent open with powerful feelings. During *aninut*, Jews are not required to do good deeds (*mitzvot*) or recite their dutiful prayers. We are free to grieve with the full force of our spirits. No restraining rules."

I loved that idea. *Aninut*. *Unfettered* grief. No rules.

Now am I saying that wailing and tears and anger are the template for all expressions of grief? That those who don't wail are not really grieving? Of course not. Both Richard and I weep easily. Always have. We both heard baloney about this easy weeping when we were children...you know, "Boys don't cry," and all that nonsense.

But *not* wailing, *not* crying, *not* getting angry isn't some inferior form of grief, or worse, no grief at all.

When my friends were dying of the epidemic in San Francisco, I always wailed when I heard of their deaths. My partner Phil would then hold me as I fell to the floor and curled up like a pillbug for an hour, sobbing. It's my way. He was not afraid of my feelings rolling out with such intensity. He had the courtesy not to say, "There, there now." He just let me wail as long as I needed to.

He often loved these same folks I was weeping for. But he never wept when he heard. "I just don't cry," he told me once. Never have. My family just doesn't do that, so I never have."

"But how do you express your grief?" I asked.

"Oh, I just sneeze."

When he said this, I didn't think I heard right. So I asked him to clarify. He simply said, "I don't cry, I sneeze. You know, ah choo."

"Really?" I asked. "I've never heard of such a thing.

"Well, it's how I grieve."

Sure enough, when our friend Alex's mother called me to tell me he had died, and that she wanted me to do his service, I fell to the floor and wept, and Phil held me as usual.

At the service down in Hollister near his folks' walnut farm, tears ran down my cheeks, even as I was doing the service. When I offered people a chance to tell stories about Alex, Phil stood up. He talked about how they met, and just started to say something else when, all of a sudden, on this warm summer day, he started to sneeze as if he had the worst cold in creation. He sneezed so much that he had to sit down. And then I remembered. His sneezing was him grieving in the way he grieved.

And I told myself on that day that I would always, during my ministry, lift up the idea that each and every grief felt by each and every person is unique. There may be some overlap...like I said, Richard and I are both easy weepers...but even still, we don't overlap entirely by any means. I really don't overlap fully with anyone I know.

Over the years, I've heard folks insist that grief *always* has a predictable pattern like the famous one Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross outlined for us decades ago: *Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance*. And it's true, sometimes, that grief, for some people, opens up exactly in that order. Most of the time, my experience has taught me forcefully, it does not. Some don't ever bargain, others start off with acceptance, and then enter a state of denial two years later. But over my years in the ministry, I have only found people who had totally different patterns. Over the last few years, after burying three members of my family, father, mother and brother, I've noticed that memory loss and lack of focus has hit me hard. Neither of those two ideas are specifically on Kubler Ross's list. Maybe it's because I am Belletini, not Kubler Ross.

When my sister called me up to tell me that our mother had died, I was down in Cincinnati with my friend Michael, about to enter the store to shop for Thanksgiving Dinner at the all-encompassing grocery store, Jungle Jim's. It was raining cats and dogs, when my sister called me. I had just gotten out of the car to make it into the store, but Michael held me right there in that rain, and then when we went in, he held me in the aisle by the olives, as I did my usual wailing. People rolled their shopping carts around us without comment. But then, I realized 15 folks were coming to my house for dinner in two days, and that my mother's funeral would not be till after Thanksgiving. So with Michael still at my side, I shopped. Bought the cheeses I needed, the artichokes, the fresh cranberries. Practical, detail oriented things. I stopped crying. My memory was working perfectly...I never even got my shopping list out of my jacket pocket. If anything, I was happy as I went around the store. Yes, even some kinds of happiness can be a disguise grief takes too, at least sometimes.

When I told this to a friend of mine, he was surprised by what I chose to do. "I would have thought you would have just gone home and cancelled Thanksgiving." "No," I said, "I wanted to do exactly what my mother used to do, which is to cook an incredible Thanksgiving Dinner. It's the best way to grieve for her that I can think of!"

What I am saying this morning is that grieving is a privilege for us all, an honor, a piece of good fortune, life being what it is. There are a thousand ways to do grief work, and all of them have something to offer, whether they are noisy or quiet. But actually letting the moments go forward instead of holding them back is important, I think, no matter what we do. Grief may be longer or shorter in duration...there is no right length of time....but I don't see how it helps to put the breaks on completely, and live as if there was some escape clause you haven't been clever enough to find yet.

No, our Mission statement puts it well: the diversity with which we face the ubiquitous and completely expected losses in our lives is a strength, not a weakness. Whether you cry or not, whether you sneeze or write or grow irritable or get down in the dumps, it's all a moving forward, an expression of "Yes" to your love, and "Yes" to the way life really is. As the poet says, eventually you will find the shape of your grief, and fit it into the shape of your whole life, as an essential part of what makes you as wonderful as you are.

And when you do that, you may join my friend Joshua who visited here and looked at the words in our Mission...with those glowing words asking us to consider the strength in our grief diversity, and say with him..."This is very deep."

### **Offering**

The time of offering is the part of the celebration where we share responsibility for this place, this time, and all that we do here. We do not give to the elected leaders in the church, but to ourselves, since we are the community. Please be generous, knowing that we budget a percentage of what we give to social justice projects in the larger community. Thanks for all you do. The offering will now be given and received.

### **New Member Ceremony**