

THE SHIFT FROM ME TO YOU

Psalm 77

Across the street from a former congregation where I was minister, there was and is a seniors residence. I had run a grief group there at one point and some of the residents knew me. One day I got a call. There was a new resident there named Lewis. He wanted to make an appointment to see me. Once we met, he told me what was going on. In the last six months, Lewis had lost his spouse of 50 years, and for mobility reasons had had to sell the house they had shared together for 40 years. He was now living in a small unit and among people who were strangers. Even though he had children nearby, he felt very much alone. He was swallowed up in grief. Could you blame him? How much loss does it take before we cave in? What could I say in response other than sit there in silence as he quietly wept?...

Grief comes at us in all kinds of ways, doesn't it? Some of you taking in this service in person and online know something of what Lewis was going through. Some of you know grief in other ways too: a loss of a significant relationship and all it represents... a job... an ability in body or mind... And even as some of us have the inner and outer resources to cope, for others of us and for reasons we cannot explain or understand all too often, we get swallowed up for a time, and sometimes for a long time...

Psalm 77 is all about grief. And the grief is expressed as a prayer to God, a prayer of lament in search of consolation: "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that God may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints... I am so troubled that I cannot speak..." Have there been times in your life where such a prayer could have resonated? May this be such a time for you?...

Furthermore, any experience of consolation seems to be as absent as is God: "Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favourable? Has God's steadfast love ceased forever? Are the Mighty One's promises at an end for all time? Has the Holy One forgotten to be gracious? Has God in anger shut up God's compassion?" Wow! What a disappointment God is! And more. If God is almighty to deliver, God is doing a bad job for the psalmist. And more. Maybe God is intentionally neglecting if not punishing the psalmist... It can certainly feel that way...

And isn't this so true to the experience of grief when we are in the crucible of it? We can feel everything and everyone is against us, including God; or if not against us, no one can really understand or help us. We are swallowed up in our feelings of being alone. It's not that we are choosing to be alone. We are thrust into it because the pain we are carrying and the sadness

we are feeling are too overwhelming for us to distance from them enough to find a way forward and beyond. We are lost and even God cannot find us if God is even there...

But what if this psalm is meant to be read as part of a journey, providing us with a map for how we may walk the journey through grief to the other side, however long the journey may take? From beginning to end the psalm takes a major turn. There is a shift that happens. Somehow, hope begins to enter in the praying and sunlight begins to break through. How does this happen?

It happens, first, when the psalmist's prayer of lament totally focused on themselves, changes into questions about God. Initially, the questions come out as questioning God's absence and interpreting it as abandonment and even maybe punishment. Being swallowed up in grief can often involve feelings of "why-me?" self-pity, all the way to feelings of "I'm being punished for something!" paranoia.

But then, we come to vs. 10: "And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'" So what does this mean? This verse has been notoriously difficult for Hebrew scholars to translate. But all scholars agree that the psalmist is trying to express that something in their understanding is changing. Somehow, they come to a point of questioning whether their interpretation of God's absence or punishment in their grief is accurate. Isn't God always a God of compassion and mercy, a God of "steadfast love and faithfulness"? So why would it be different in a time of grief? Wouldn't God so understood and experienced be especially present in difficult times? Perhaps the focus of praying needs to shift. Perhaps the thinking must change. And perhaps, as the thinking and focus of praying changes other things may begin to happen.

And so, we come to the next verse which reads: "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord..." And what are the deeds the psalmist calls to mind? "You are a God who works wonders; you displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph."

And how did God redeem the people? "When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled... The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters... You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses, Aaron and Miriam." These are references to the amazing things that happened for the Hebrews as they escaped slavery in Egypt and made their way to freedom through the waters of the Red Sea. There is also reference to the mighty wonders on Mount Sinai when the people received the 10 commandments and made a covenant with God. There was lighting, thunder and volcanic fire, and the people experienced all this as the presence of God among them.

So how does all this help the psalmist? It helps them by transposing their very personal pain and grief into a larger narrative, a narrative of redemption toward freedom. Our life journey will involve losses and hardships if we live long enough. None of us is exempt. From the moment of our baptism all the way through life's ups and downs, none of us is exempt from the challenges and hardships. The question is, will we be able to find God and will God be able to find us so that we are brought to the other side? Or will we become so deeply swallowed up by the waters and so deeply entrenched in our fear, that we will not be able to trust that we are part of a larger story of redemption?

You see, any one of us needs to be helped to step out of the pit we may fall into. There are very legitimate reasons we fall into the pit. The pain of something or someone deeply loved and lost is a big one. But how are we brought to that point where we can step back and open ourselves to receive compassion and feel compassion for others too, which is essential for our journey of healing toward greater wholeness? By recalling the story of their people and how God was there as steadfast love and faithfulness, and also, how God's love and faithfulness were manifest through trusted leaders like Moses, Aaron and Miriam, space is opened up in the psalmist's soul for faith, hope and love to rise up anew. It's not about getting past the grief as if what is lost is not always a part of us. No. It's about opening ourselves anew to how life may yet evolve and grow because grief gives a richness of depth to our loving we've never known before. It becomes a new gift we have and we are called to share it with others.

Psalm 77 makes a big shift from the me, myself and I of the psalmist in the pit of their grief, to the you of God and their people and the founding story of their liberation. We all need to make this shift in order to begin our journey to ever greater healing and wholeness – from me, myself and I to you, O God, and the wider possibilities for blessing and being blessed in life no matter what waters we may be passing through...

Lewis grieved for a long time in isolation. But in time, the sunlight of love shone through to warm his heart and soul. He met other residents who also had their losses. He became involved in our church community and attended bible studies and discussion groups. In time, he was helping comfort others who were where he was earlier. He continued to grieve what he had lost. But rather than isolating him in a lonely pain, it now became part of a new quality in his capacity to love and share compassion, to laugh more easily even as he cried more easily too, and to savour the simple joys like never before. He knew one day he would join the others he loved who had gone before. He believed this more firmly than ever now – the eternal communion of saints. And yet, he also knew there was life that still needed to be lived here and now, and there was much he still had to learn, enjoy, give and share...

I'm so thankful to have met Lewis and others like Lewis. The privilege of a church community that is vibrant and alive is that we have the beauty of life at all stages. We celebrate with joy the life of children and how in baptism we recognize the beginning of a journey with God above,

Christ beside and the Spirit within. We also celebrate the lives of those who have died and offer our love and support to their families who are also a part of us. We give thanks for the communion of saints, a faith that is given the gift of seeing life as so much bigger than the physical years given us here and now. Our life journey is measured in eternal terms. May we continue to celebrate, give thanks, grieve with the grieving, enjoy the laughter of warm fellowship and the tears of shared communion. To God be the glory!
Amen.