

## WHEN YOU CAN'T STOP BAD FROM HAPPENING

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 19: 41-48

When I first met Sally, she was in her early twenties. She was coming back to church she said. She had grown up in church, but then left with her family. She had problems and her family didn't know how to talk about it in church. So they left. It started with an eating disorder. Sally stopped eating until she got so sick she was hospitalized. Years of treatment and therapy got her somewhat stable. But then life got tough again and she started cutting herself. Cutting herself was not a suicide attempt. It was her desire to feel reality. Blood was reality. That's when I met her.

Her story was sad. Her parents and brother were good people. But her father was domineering and controlling. Her mother was very loving and capable, but didn't have the courage to challenge her husband. Her brother dealt with his family's tension and dysfunction in less dramatic ways than Sally. He just drifted into isolation and depression, unable to hold a job or a serious relationship.

As the years went on, Sally got more treatment, but also education. She came to understand how her father grew up and the reasons he had become the way he was. She also came to understand her mother and the reasons she made a choice to stay in a bad marriage with a domineering husband. But it was still a choice, no? Could her parents not have chosen to be and do differently if they came to realize they could? She tried to challenge her father to change his ways and get some help. She confronted him. She did the same with her mother. She did the same with her brother. It felt good. It felt good to get angry and proactive. It empowered her to feel some outrage at the sad history of her family. She would not let them off the hook until they changed. It was her mission...

I lost touch with Sally until some years later. She came in to see me. She told me she was still struggling in some ways. Her family were still stuck in their self-destructive ways. And yet, there was something else I saw in Sally as well, something new, something different, something positive and life-giving. Even though her family hadn't changed all these years and even though they continued to hurt her and even push her away when she pushed at them, she had come to a different place inside. She was no longer angry the same way. What happened?

Before I say anymore about Sally, let's ponder our own stories when we think about bad that is happening and our inability to change it. Many of us hopefully don't have a life story as sad as Sally's. And yet, I'm sure all of us would change many things in our lives and our world if we could, no? How do we cope when we can't stop bad from happening? How do we find fullness of meaning, peace, even joy in life when stuff has happened and is happening to make us frustrated, sad, angry, helpless, or at a loss?

Let's look at our scripture readings more closely. First, the prophesy of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is composing the words, but he is speaking for God. He is prophesying what God must be feeling with the situation of the people. Israel wants security. They're willing to abandon faith in God and align themselves with other gods. They're willing to form alliances that are leading them to moral ruin. The ruling class wants money and security. They will abandon care for the vulnerable and needy. They will use violence against their own people. Abandoning God is abandoning moral standards that prioritize justice, fairness and care for all beginning with the most vulnerable. But are those who are vulnerable and at the bottom any better for being victims. No. Many of them are poisoned by the same toxicity of bitter hate and animosity against each other. They have lost their way as a people. They are far from earlier days as a nation when they made a covenant with God based on the ten commandments.

So, how does God respond? How would you respond? God can't force them to change their ways. Threats of destruction aren't working. Fear seems to harden the hearts of the people even more. Shouldn't God abandon them? Shouldn't God harden God's own heart and give in to anger? According to Jeremiah, God expresses many emotions at different times including anger and frustration. God even makes threats. But in the end, God's deeper heart takes over and God is overcome with grief: "for the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me... O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" God's frustration and anger end in overwhelming tears.

But aren't tears a sign of defeat? Doesn't prolonged grief just paralyze us? Isn't anger a more effective way to make change? And if there isn't change, shouldn't we just cut ourselves off and leave people to their own devices? They'll hit a wall at some point and then we'll feel vindicated because we warned this would happen.

But is anger the better way or is the better way giving voice to our grief and allowing ourselves to weep? Grieving and weeping the bad we cannot change or control does something else that anger can never do if we stay angry. Grieving and weeping the bad can open space in us for compassion and understanding that can open doors to a whole other way of finding strength.

Even if we have to make some tough decisions in life, if we make such decisions from a deeper openness of our hearts, they will be better decisions and we will experience blessing as human beings. Israel may not change. But God is growing deeper in God's commitment to love this people. Even though they may not ultimately change and even though they may ultimately suffer further humiliation and defeat as a result, God won't abandon them. God's grief, mourning and weeping will keep God grounded in more life-giving feelings than anger and frustration that in time become bitterness.

Anger hardens and ultimately destroys us as much as it cuts us off from others. Sometimes it's better to cut ourselves off from others. It's better than being in constant conflict or frustration or submitting to hurt and abuse. But we also need to find a way to compassion in our hearts otherwise we ourselves will be hardened. Compassion enlarges us and makes us open to others. If one day change does come, we're open to it, not shut down and cut off because we're nursing a deeper bitterness that shuts us down.

And this brings us to our gospel reading. Here, Jesus expresses deep feelings for his people from sadness and grief over the destruction to come, to anger at the leaders who are leading the people to such destruction. Like God, Jesus is unable to persuade the people as a whole from the leadership on down, to change the hate that lives in their hearts – hate against enemies, hate against each other - Pharisees against Sadducees... the people against the Romans... rich against poor and poor against rich... Jews against Samaritans, and both against gentiles... the self-righteous zealots against those they condemn as sinners... Jesus weeps over it all, saying "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" You continue to harden your hearts.

And then he rages in the temple when he sees what the religious leaders have made of the symbol of their faith – the great temple. It's all about plotting and scheming and business. It's all about destroying enemies and taking out those who undermine their power and control. None of Jesus' preaching, teaching and miracles changes them. Their hearts are as hard as ever. In fact, we read: "The chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him." And we know they eventually succeed.

So what is Jesus to do? What is God to do? Yes, there is outrage and wrath, even threats and warnings of doom to come if they continue on the destructive path they're on. But through all this, God and the God-embodied-Jesus are deeply in touch with their grief about it all, and weeping is a natural way to express heart-felt grief. But grief is not an end in itself. Grief and weeping open up the heart to compassion. Better decisions are made when compassion is the operating energy rather than hate, resentment, bitterness and blame. Jesus is crucified

on a cross out of the same hate. He is a problem and a threat that must be eliminated. The people are bitter toward him. He did not bring the redemption they were looking for, which was defeat of their enemies. Everyone has enemies of some kind. But focussing on our enemies only opens the door for the greatest enemy to take over – hate, resentment, bitterness and hardness within. In the New Testament, the name for this energy is Satan. Opening the door to hate, resentment and blame opens the door to Satan.

So how does all this apply to us today? Let me continue with Sally's story. Even though Sally had tried for many years to get her father, her mother and her brother to make different choices, and even though she would have had much justification to be bitter and angry toward her parents for what they had done to her, Sally had come to a different place. She credited this to her faith. She still read the bible I had given her years earlier. She was still under regular psychiatric care. But she was also building a life of compassion and love.

She was able to forgive her parents. She was able to feel sorry for them, even her father. She was able to grieve and to weep for them and for herself. But she could love and enjoy life also. She kept in touch with her family even though she also needed space from them for her sanity. She was able to help others who suffered from depression, suicidal thoughts and self-harm. But most astonishing of all to me: she was able to say this: "Harris, I've come to a point where I can say that I have no regrets or bitterness about any of it. I am who I am today because I've had to journey through all I've had to journey. I can help others because of what I've been through. I can understand them and love them from the inside."

As I was reflecting on what Sally told me, I came to understand our biblical story better. What, after all, does it mean to confess that God has become one of us in Jesus Christ? What does it mean when we say that Jesus passed through all that we human beings pass through, even the severest form of abuse and a terrible death? To keep a heart open through grief and tears is to keep a heart open to forgiveness, even if people keep making bad choices and failing to change. Forgiveness keeps the door open, even if we have to keep some distance for our own sanity and peace. But keeping the door open also keeps us grounded in love. It opens the door to our own peace.

So how do we live in the face of the bad around us we cannot stop happening? We can engage it with our anger and frustration. But more profoundly and effectively, we can keep in touch with our deeper grief, mourning and even weeping, because it will keep us more human. Being in touch with our grief can keep us open to the love that is yet possible, and the change love can yet bring about. Anything is possible when God is moving through us. Let us pray: Find us wherever we are, O God. Sustain us and enrich us as we open ourselves to you, in our grief as much as our joy... Amen.