

GRIEF AND HOPE

Lamentations 1: 1-8; Psalm 137; Luke 19: 41-44

One of the most amazing stories I've heard in the news over the last 10 years is the story about a remarkable indigenous woman named Gladys. Gladys was born into a loving home and community. But at the age of four, she was taken away to a Residential School. In the school Gladys was made to forget everything about her culture and roots, and when she didn't comply, she was beaten. Over the years, Gladys also suffered sexual abuse, but it was only later in life that these memories surfaced. By the time she got out of school, she was a teenager with a substandard education and many terrible memories. She had also become alienated from her family and her culture. She didn't fit into Canadian society nor her indigenous community. She didn't know who she was.

Her dream was to become a nurse, but given how little she had received of an education, she had to get any job she could. She married a man who was abusing alcohol and eventually was abusing her. Even though she had two children with this man, at one point she realized that if she wanted herself and the children to survive she had to leave. And so she did. She went to the only place she knew to go, back to the indigenous community in which she was born. But because of residency requirements, her children could live in the reserve but not her. So she left the children with her family and went to Winnipeg to work and make some money so that she could set herself up to receive her children back. Unfortunately, she fell into drinking again, and even after the children came to live with her, she had become addicted. She hit rock bottom, and at one point she realized that she was endangering the life of her children by her lifestyle. And this is the beginning of how things started to change for Gladys...

Now before I continue with part two of this story, I want to bring all of us into it. None of us here have been part of a Residential School. None of us here have experienced the kind of tragic loss Gladys suffered. But many of us here have experienced loss and will experience loss. Loss is that common denominator that makes us all siblings in some way. What kind of loss have we known, will we know? Think about the loss of a loved one.... Think about the loss of a relationship.... Think about the loss of a circle of friendship or support or community.... Think about the loss of work or a vocation or an opportunity.... Think about the loss of our health or the health of someone we love.... Think about experiences in life where there has been abuse or injustice, violence or accident.... Loss comes in many ways, and it makes us all siblings in some way...

Now I want to bring in our scripture readings. The people of Israel experienced loss... deep loss. The book of Lamentations is beautifully poetic expression of this loss. It is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah because Jeremiah is a prophet who experienced significant sorrow. In the opening verses of the book we are given a picture of the kind of loss Israel suffers. There is the loss of their sacred capital city Jerusalem. The invading Babylonian armies have burned everything to the ground. But the loss of the city also symbolizes a much deeper loss. It's the loss of a culture, identity and independence. The best and brightest are taken away into exile, and the survivors left behind have little left. Thousands have been killed and violated. Families have been separated. Villages and crops have been burned down. The loss is overwhelming...

Loss is terrible however it happens. But several things about loss make it even worse. Our passage refers to three complicating factors about loss. First there is the injustice of loss. It's one thing to lose someone in old age. It's another thing to lose someone in the prime of life. It's one thing to lose someone who dies at home or in hospital surrounded by family, friends and a community of care. It's another to lose someone through violence or unjust circumstances. Injustice makes loss that much more painful.

Second, there is guilt. Sometimes we feel complicit in the loss. Sometimes we feel we have not been there for the person lost. Guilt can make our losses that much more painful. We feel we have somehow got what we deserved, or that somehow we have contributed to the loss in some way. Things could have turned out differently, we believe, if we had done something differently. Guilt is a terrible complication in our experience of loss.

Finally, there is the experience of humiliation. We lose certain abilities and we are left feeling helpless. Maybe we experience being mocked or belittled. Maybe we are left feeling inadequate or pathetic. Humiliation can make us feel angry or bitter. However it affects us, humiliation prolongs the pain of our loss and it prevents us from moving through it.

If we take the time to read the eight opening verses of Lamentations we will recognize all three factors which complicate loss at play in the psyche of the Israelites – the feeling that grave injustice has been done to them, but also that they are also to blame for how things have turned out. There is also the feeling of humiliation, that their oppressors are mocking them and belittling their loss, or just pushing them to get over it. Loss is bad any which way it happens. But when we also experience with our losses a sense of injustice, a sense of guilt and a sense of humiliation and belittling, the pain of our loss is compounded that much more.

So it was for Gladys. She felt responsible at some level for her choices. But she also felt angry at what had been done to her. It was cruel and unfair. She was also left feeling

humiliated at her inability to properly care for her children and get her life in order. People would tell her to get on with it and straighten herself out. She knew it was more complicated even though she blamed herself for not getting on with it. So how did Gladys move through her losses? How do we move through our losses, and move through them in such a way that we can live again, and live again well?

Let's mine our scripture readings for some revelatory guidance. What we are given through poetry like Lamentations, through prayers sung and spoken like the psalms, through spontaneous exclamations of grief like that of Jesus in our gospel reading?. What we are given is a pathway through grieving to the possibility of hope and new life. We are given a method. And whether we are the ones grieving, or the ones beside someone who is grieving, it behoves us to pay attention, otherwise we will remain stuck in our grief rather than come through marked yet blessed as human beings.

Three points need to be noted about this pathway through grief to hope. First, we need to find voice for our grief. We need to be able to name and articulate our grief in some way. This means we need to give ourselves permission, and we need to be given permission to express our grief in whatever way it can happen. This also means we need to be among people or within a family or community where we are allowed and even encouraged to do all this. To name our grief doesn't mean we need to find answers for it. The goal is not to overcome it. We simply have to express it, as bad and awful as it is. This doesn't mean we have to be abusive in our expression of grief. We need to find ways to express how we are hurting and why we are hurting, rather than hurt someone else because we're angry. Lamentations is a beautiful example of creative expression of grief. There is no way to hope without such expression. You can't bypass grief, forget about the loss or just get over it without naming and articulating what has been lost. It's the first step.

Second, grief must be honoured and lingered over. It needs its time. We need to try to understand our loss even if there is no answer to it. And there is no set time. The more there are complicating factors such as injustice, guilt or humiliation, the more time is needed to separate the loss from these other elements that latch on to us through the grieving. We can't just get over it. We can't just push people through it. Grieving must be honoured and lingered over.

This also doesn't mean we need to walk around mournfully all the time, whether we are grieving ourselves or supporting someone else through their grief. No. We can still enjoy life's blessings. But we are ready to recognize that sometimes memories will re-emerge, things will trigger thoughts and feelings, we will be caught at different times with sorrow and sadness, even as we continue to live our lives. That's the way grief works. The key is to give ourselves permission, to allow this to be what it is. We must not put pressure on

ourselves or others that we or they must do and be a certain way, that certain things are wrong and shouldn't be that way. No. There are no two ways of grieving like there are no two people who are exactly the same, like there are no two losses that are exactly the same. It is what it is, and that has to be ok. The journey must be honoured and even lingered over at times. Once again, we witness in Lamentations and elsewhere how Israel continued to find ways to express their grief for what it was, but also to honour it and linger over it, to wrestle with the injustice, the rage, the feelings of guilt, of humiliation... and they had to wrestle with their faith in God.

And this brings us to the final point I want to make about grieving our losses. Grief is not an end in itself. Our lives are given us not for grief, but for hope and joy. But the way to hope and joy is via grieving when we lose what's precious and what we love. We are made out of love and for love. The deeper we love the deeper we grieve our losses. But the final step is to trust the journey. We are called to trust that the expression of grief and the honouring of grief will, in time, lead to hope and joy. What does such hope and joy look like? Let's go back to Gladys' story.

The first step of hope through grief for Gladys was her admission that she was an alcoholic in need of help. She joined AA. And after some time of speaking her pain and finding trusted friendship through her pain, she became a leader in AA helping others, listening to them and walking with them. To help others is a way of finding hope through our own grieving.

Gladys also developed her faith in God. She was able to embrace a Christianity that was different than what she witnessed in the Residential schools, a Christianity that also walked alongside her traditional indigenous spirituality. Over time she became involved in addictions counselling, and she was hired at a women's correctional facility, where she was recognized as the most effective counsellor they ever had. In addition, Gladys attended a reunion at her residential school, which was now closed. At the reunion, she confronted some of her abusers. She forgave them, and as she told her children afterward: she felt pity for her abusers more than anger. God had filled her heart and healed her heart with love so that she had let go that grinding bitterness and anger on the one hand, or self-abuse, defeat and despair on the other, both of which are so endemic to victims of abuse.

But what is perhaps even more remarkable than Gladys' story is the gift of spirit that she had been given. Those she counselled at the correctional facility had this to say about Gladys: She has an incredibly powerful healing love to give, and what she gives is overflowing and generous. She is non-judgemental. It doesn't matter what you have done. She is honest and straight about the bad stuff. But she accepts you so fully you feel warm all over. You feel something like scales fall away from within you and your spirit opens up. Gladys has a rare

gift, and everyone recognizes it. You speak to her and she listens to you and looks at you like you're the only person in the world.

So how did Gladys come to acquire such a generous capacity to love, forgive, let go and embrace others so fully, especially when she's lived through such horrible things in her life? We call this miraculous and we call it the grace of God. We recognize greater powers working here than just human psychology. Gladys had to find space to name and express her grief, to have time to linger over it and wrestle through it without being pressured to move on or get over it. But then, she needed that higher power to begin working through her, transforming her grief into powerful streams of healing love for others and for herself.

This is the way faith in God works. Hope is faith into the future and into the greater whole. And love is the ground that builds faith and opens up hope.

Whoever we are, each of us will experience grief in our lives. The question is: how will we walk the journey through it? Do we have the kind of freedom within, the kind of relationships or community without, that will give us the space to name our grief, to be listened to without judgement, and then embraced in our grief? Will we take the time we need, without having to put a pre-set limit to it? Will we talk through those complicating circumstances of grief that make it more painful? And will we engage the transcendent mystery we name God through it all, wrestling for a deeper faith, a more durable hope and a stronger, more hearty love to become the source not only of our own fullness and peace, but a blessing to those around us?

We will always have a part of us attached to our losses. But that part of us can also become a blessing for others and for ourselves, because it gives us a deeper way into the beauty and preciousness of life that we would otherwise lack. May we discover fresh grounds for a fullness of hope in the midst of our tears.

Amen.