

## FREEDOM AND ACCEPTANCE

Luke 22: 39-46; Acts 1: 1-11

One day, while at the church office at a former congregation, I got a call. It was a director from the seniors residence near the church. They had just welcomed a new resident and he wanted to speak with a minister. His name was Lewis. He came in to see me. He told me that his children thought he was depressed and needed some grief counselling. I asked him to explain. Well, within the last year, Lewis had suffered the loss of his spouse of 60 years and had sold the home they had shared together for 40 years, a home in which they had also raised their family. He was also now suffering mobility issues and also felt lonely in a new place where he knew nobody. "Wow", I thought to myself, "I would be depressed, too, if I was going through all that!" Poor Lewis. Even though his children were very supportive, he felt he could not grieve in their presence. He had always been their father. He was the one who took care of things and continued to offer advice and support. Breaking down and giving in to the full weight of his loss felt overwhelming.

Lewis also had some theological questions. Most of his life he had been involved in a fairly liberal church. But it was all about being nice and kind. Faith was all about doing and less about praying and feeling God. He had never thought much about the afterlife or the dimension called heaven. Would he really see his beloved spouse again? Was she spiritually alive in another dimension? Was it ok to talk to her? It was as if he needed to discover a whole other side to spirituality and faith, as much as he also needed permission and support to journey through his grief without apology. It would take time and much time and there was no time limit, I told him. He would never get past grieving the loss of his beloved in her embodied presence.

But perhaps, in time, something new could also emerge for him in the new configuration that his life could become. Lewis not only kept coming to see me, but he also joined the congregation and began attending fellowship time and adult study groups. Over time, he also started connecting with other fellow residents and even accompanying them through their losses and grief. What had happened to Lewis to help move him in this positive direction? Was there some wisdom the rest of us could gain from his journey?

Well, before I say any more about Lewis, let me also bring in a second person. Jenny was also someone I knew in a former congregation. I first met her at the church as she came with some of her teenage kids. She was in a motorized chair and paralyzed from the waist down. Once I got to know her a bit she shared with me her story. She had been an active young woman in Jamaica. One evening as she was walking home with friends after a party, a speeding car ran into them while they were crossing the street. The driver was drunk. While her friends avoided being struck, Jenny wasn't so fortunate. She woke up in hospital and was

told the news. She would never walk again. The man was charged and he even spent time in prison. Jenny had to work through years of bitterness about the whole thing. Regardless of how much time he got in prison, she would never walk again.

Eventually, she came to Canada and lived in supportive housing as she tried to parent her children as best she could. She became a mother not only to them, but to some of their friends as well. At one point, though, Jenny told me she realized that in order to give her heart totally to her children, she needed to let go the bitterness she carried in her heart. All her frustration in her limited mobility and need for medical support was also affecting how she could parent and build relationships.

This is also when she began to seek out God. She prayed hard for God to remove the bitterness in her heart. The answer to her prayer came one night in a dream. It was a very vivid dream where the man who had hit her came to her and was pleading with Jenny for forgiveness. In her dream Jenny told him that even though her life was permanently scarred by what he had done, the bitterness in her heart was also choking her. She would forgive him because she needed to be free. She also gave him permission to forgive himself.

The next morning Jenny felt a huge weight had been lifted from her heart. Something had changed. Later that day, she got a call from relatives in Jamaica. Evidently, the man who had struck her had just died the day before. Goodness! He had died and then visited Jenny in her dreams. It's as if his spirit needed to be released through her forgiveness. It's as if her freedom from bitterness and his freedom from guilt were coupled together and she was able to do in her dream what she hadn't been able to do when awake. I've never forgotten Jenny's story.

OK, but what do the stories of Lewis and Jenny have to teach us about freedom and acceptance? Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom. Today in the church year is what we call Ascension Sunday. Our reading from Acts gives us an account of when the risen Christ stopped appearing to the disciples in a vivid way. He "ascended", which means he went to join God in the dimension of reality called heaven. He would be alive and among them, but in Spirit not in body. Could they trust that they would be ok? Could they trust that a new chapter would begin for them on their own? Could they trust that the Spirit of Jesus would be with them and move through them so that they could become his hands, feet and heart in the world?

The angels tell them that Jesus would return just as he left. They would experience an absence now, but Jesus would return in a whole new way as Spirit energy to transform them. They must wait and trust that they would be "baptized by the Holy Spirit." Can you imagine what it was like for them? They had suffered the loss of Jesus once, then saw him risen. They had recovered a sense of hope and future direction, and then he left them again, permanently. Could they really accept what had happened and trust what would come?

Like Lewis, who had suffered multiple losses, the disciples had to grieve and let go the life they knew and the embodied togetherness with Jesus they had. They had to accept that things could never be what they were. But this didn't mean there were no new possibilities to come and no new doors that would open. They needed to remain faithful, they needed to build strength in their togetherness and they had to be open in trust to what they would be called to do as the embodied followers of Jesus in the world.

Lewis grieved. He suffered the loss and absence of the person and life he had. But in time, with acceptance, he gained a new freedom to live life again. As already mentioned, he found community and was himself an instigator of community for others. As he himself had suffered loss he found fullness in walking the journey of loss with others so that they would not feel isolated and alone. His faith in a transcendence of reality that included a heaven as much as an earth grew, and even as his beloved life partner was no longer with him in body, she visited him in spirit often. Learning to accept his new limitations and his losses opened a door to freedom, and such freedom led him to find joy in living again.

In our second scripture reading, Jesus is confronted with having to face that his vision of God as love and God's vision for the people serving such love, has been rejected. How will divine love embodied in Jesus win against such rejection? Will love win by Jesus running away from the terrible fate that awaits him as the rejected messiah? Will love win by imaging God as a judge who will punish the leaders and the people in retaliation for their rejection and abuse? Or will God's will of love win by opening another door? Jesus' new plan is to face his rejection head on by absorbing it into himself, body and soul. His struggle in prayer is all about this. He will suffer crucifixion, but he must continue to choose love in the face of it all. He will forgive the authorities who have brought in the Romans to torture and execute him. He will forgive the crowds who have turned on him, his followers who have abandoned him and even God who in his soul has forsaken him. Forgiveness doesn't make things right. It opens a door where healing and reconciliation may happen. Forgiveness is an invitation and call for change and new direction.

Ok but what about freedom, and freedom through acceptance? Acceptance here is not about accepting loss and grieving the loss as a path to freedom to love again, to live again, and even to find joy again. No. When the loss is also the cruel wound of rejection, injustice, and abuse, acceptance must involve forgiveness at its base in order to come to any freedom. What in life must we, like Jesus and like Jenny, forgive in order to move on? What must we let go? What must we ourselves seek forgiveness for? To accept forgiveness we must acknowledge our need for it. To forgive someone else we must let go the ways their sin against us continues to affect us. Forgiveness is not about forgetting what happened or ignoring the injustice of what's been done. Justice is always a concern and truth must always be spoken and pursued. But forgiveness means I let go any vendetta or need to hurt someone because of what I've suffered. Forgiveness means I accept what happened and let

it go so that room is made in my heart for a fullness of love to enter, so that I can live again, wounds and all.

One of the great teachers of freedom through acceptance is Victor Frankl. Frankl is well known as a brilliant psychotherapist who developed his own style of therapy known as "Logotherapy." Frankl was a prisoner in a German concentration camp. He describes how those who survived had to develop their inner life ever more deeply as their outer circumstances were becoming more difficult. Those who survived had to find ways to build their inner spiritual capacity in the face of atrocities being committed. And so, the simplest things they witnessed in nature and art, and any gesture of human kindness, became cherished gifts. They had to find beauty in the simplest things and savour it in the face of the vast ugliness all around them. What he learned, he writes, is that: "everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

We cannot control many things in life, and many things will come upon us beyond our choosing. And yet, to know we are free to choose how we will accept what is, is something we need great courage, inspiration and grace to live. Like Jesus and like the disciples, like Lewis and like Jenny, may we learn how to open ourselves again and again through acceptance, to new possibilities in life. May we discover new freedom to be, new freedom to love, and new freedom to see options before us at every stage of our life journey.

Let us pray: Come upon us and move through us, O divine love... Reveal your possibilities for us even when we cannot see them and even when we question our courage to choose them; Amen.