

Courage to Grieve

sermon digest

January 29, 2012

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

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Some 44 years ago, I was a seminary student in Louisville, Kentucky and a member of Crescent Hill Baptist Church, the church located just behind the campus where I was studying. One morning my pastor, John Claypool, returned to the pulpit after an absence with the word that he was returning to us as a wounded brother, coming to share with us something of what he had experienced in the darkness. His young daughter, Laura Lou, had been diagnosed with acute leukemia some months earlier. After a time of remission when hopes had been raised that the prescribed medicine or the prayers for divine intervention or both were working, she had slipped into crisis. She was hospitalized for two weeks in intense pain with her anxious parents keeping vigil by her bedside. A drug was identified that gave her another nine months of life; but the process had been excruciating physically, emotionally and spiritually. Her father came to us to speak honestly about the darkness then and later, the darkness he would experience upon her death. The scripture he chose for the service upon his initial return was the concluding verses of Isaiah 40, the passage we used last week with the promise "those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength." Contrary to the victorious stories told by others who had gone through the darkness, John Claypool shared with us his struggle for faith in that excruciating moment. Unlike those who contend that God's promise put them on a plain above the experience of fear and grief, he spoke of the varying ways, the varying moments in which we experience faith. There are, he acknowledged, times when we, as Isaiah puts it, "mount up with wings like eagles" and know sheer joy and ecstasy in our experience of God. At other times, faith emboldens us to "run and not be weary" and we put every ounce of our energy in getting to work on meeting and solving problems and issues. At other times, however, joyous celebration and dance are out of the question, and the challenge we confront, such as that with which he was wrestling, offers no path for resolution, other than perhaps, waiting on the doctors to prescribe the best medicine and consoling his child. Sometimes all we can do in a situation that is crucial to everything we are or have hoped for, in a situation that is indeed a matter of life and death, is to summon everything within us just to "walk and not faint."

The "Daring Hope", which we talked about last week, is not contradictory to our focus this week on the "Courage to Grieve". Contrary to those who would blush or worse, rage at any suggestion that people of faith grieve, the life of faith depicted in scripture and experienced in the lives of faithful people through the ages and still today encompasses the way of grief. Abraham at the death of Sarah, David at the death of his son Absalom, the Psalms of Lament, the prophets over the unfaithfulness of their people and Jesus before the tomb of Lazarus, all wept in grief. There is, the Preacher tells us in Ecclesiastes, "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." Struggling with pain and grief is a part of the rhythm of life for people of faith and unfaith.

Some 50 years ago Granger Westberg's *Good Grief* confronted those insisting that Christians should not grieve. Pointing to a favorite proof text, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, often read as "Grieve not!", Westberg insisted on the importance of reading the full verse: "Grieve not *as those who have no hope*". Far from prohibiting grief, the verse, Westberg insisted, indicates there is a right and a wrong way to grieve; and he went on to identify ten stages of grief he had encountered during his ministry of accompanying people through grief. We will not have time to review all ten stages, but relying on the experience of the prophet Jeremiah, we will look at two essential components of walking, step by step through the darkness toward the light.

The pathway to hope begins with honest grief. We call him the "weeping prophet" for a reason. His book brims with anguish and tears. Although at earlier times in our lives, we may have found ourselves uncomfortable with his message, events of the last decade have, in the eyes of many, made Jeremiah a book for our time. Previously somewhat at ease with the security and the future prospects for our own nation, Jeremiah's haunting images of death and destruction seemed better aimed at regions far removed from our shores, except maybe for the underground of suffering and death associated with some of our city streets. The events of 9/11 and the troubling wars that have followed, the current economic crisis and the growing gap manifesting itself between the rich and the less rich and poor in our nation, the threats to our social safety net and to education, health and our basic infrastructure as a nation have, however, made Jeremiah's struggles seem more applicable to our own time.

Add to that the pain of just aging, of witnessing the suffering and deaths of so many that we love, and we come face to face with our own need to find our way through the darkness of loss and grief to hope.

Many of you will recall the visit about a dozen of my cousins made several years ago to be with us in worship one Sunday morning. This afternoon we will go to Chattanooga to attend the memorial service for one of those cousins. In the process yesterday of contacting some of the others to be sure they had received the news, I received devastating news of cancer and dementia in others; and I realized that the celebration of family that we have enjoyed so often over the years is dwindling and will continue to dwindle in the years to come. Given the toll that deaths and illnesses have already taken, I realize that although there will be other celebrations of family in the future, they will be absent some of the people who have made those celebrations so rich in the past. I honestly recognize the loss and I grieve.

Jeremiah bears witness to a time of excruciating pain, but he does so, seeking to point toward a meaningful hope. So laden is his book with grief, however, we seldom associate him with hope at all. Speaking just after the first exiles have been carried away to Babylon, he refutes those who preach “peace, peace” when there is no peace. He refuses to “treat the wounds” of his people carelessly as if they are little more than bumps in the road. Be sure, however, that unlike some of the preachers of gloom and doom in our day, he is not rubbing his hands in glee at the prospect of the destruction of his sinful people. With unblinking courage he looks the bleak realities that surround him in the eye and joins in the suffering of God: “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!” (4:19). “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? . . . 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!” (8:19, 21, 9:1)

Looking around him, Jeremiah sees creation reverting to chaos, to the “waste and void” of which Genesis speaks before creation: “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light” (4:23). Sounding what Louis Stulman calls a “cadence of terror,” Jeremiah’s repetitious “I looked” litany depicts a scene of utter tragedy: The mountains and hills, the birds of the air, the once fruitful land that has become a desert, all reflect total desolation. And just as God had promised that one day the offspring of Abraham would be more numerous than the sand (Gen. 22:17), now Judah’s *widows* were “more numerous than the sand of the seas” (15:8). Jeremiah spoke in hyperbole, in poetry and lyric, to be sure; but do not miss his insistence that loss must not be minimized or overlooked or somehow forgotten. The only way forward was the way that coursed directly “into, through and beyond” the dreadful reality that surrounded him. Hope is possible, in other words, only when we face up to our exile and loss. Then and only then are we at a point to find our way to hope.

Any vision of the future that avoids the real world of human suffering makes a travesty of the past and can never deal with the emotional and symbolic pain of exile. . . . By force of the prophetic word, God empowers shipwrecked people to imagine a future when none seemed possible. This is the starting point for hope and recovery” [Stulman in *Shaking Heaven and Earth*, 50].

The pathway to hope opens to the future. “Not to fear,” the false prophets, proclaimed then and the false prophets proclaim now. “Things will not change; and if they do, it will only be a short while until things are back to normal.” “Two years,” Jeremiah’s rival proclaimed, “and everyone will be back home.” “Two years? No, more like seventy years,” Jeremiah responded. “And here is what you must do in the meantime. You must turn your thoughts to things the way they are. Rather than clinging to the past to which you cannot return, you must live toward the future.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters . . . multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the [shalom] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its [shalom] you will find your [shalom]. . . . For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your [shalom] and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (29:5-7, 11).

Henri Nowen tells the story of woman brought into a psychiatric ward. Clinching a penny tightly in her balled fist, she fought off anyone who came near her. “It was as though,” Nowen reflects, “she would lose her very self along with the coin” if she let it go. Prayer, he goes on to suggest, is opening our hands and our hearts to God. Only in opening ourselves up and letting of the small coins to which we cling with our lives, do we have promise of the future. Only with open hands do we discover God [recounted by Stulman, 50].

Gratitude for blessings experienced in the past must be distinguished from clinging to the past as if it is the only time and place in which we can encounter God or know human love and joy. I know for a fact that my family gathering today will be different than it has been in the past. I know that a number of the significant loved ones who helped shape my life will not be present, and I will miss them. But something else I know, there is a good possibility that this afternoon I will meet for the first time three tiny new

members of my family, a great nephew and twin great nieces born last year. The past cannot be recaptured, but the joy of new life and the responsibility of passing on to these little ones the nurture and security of a loving family is very real. Real, that is, if I cherish the past by turning forward to face the future.

Hear then this word: Grieve; yes, grieve the losses in your life. Open your eyes and grieve; yes, grieve the inequities and tragedies that afflict our land and foreign lands and get about the task of addressing them. Grieve; yes, grieve; but for heaven's sake, do not grieve as those who have no hope. Grieve and in grieving, turn toward the future that stretches ahead of us.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your [shalom] and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”