

“Again & Again: God Calls Us to Listen”

Mark 8:31-9:8

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I have been thinking about grief lately. Grief has been a steady presence this past year in every home in some way or another as our work, school, and social lives all changed, as we missed out on important connections and moments. There has also been the grief of loss of family members and friends both to COVID and during the time of COVID, loss made bigger and harder to wade through because of the ways we have been made to be separate from each other and from the rituals that would normally carry us through those early days of loss, gathering, telling stories, hugs, sitting with one another even when there is nothing left to say.

I realized that this last year, the types of grief that I encountered - both around me and inside of me - felt bigger than the usual rhythms of grief that I witness in the church or walk through in my own life. And, to be honest, I had a harder time stepping into that grief. To being present and tending to it.

That is especially true for my own feeling of grief over what it means to live through a pandemic and reimagine everything you do and how you live and connect with your people. Not a day has gone by that I'm not reminded of how much I miss being with my church, my people. But as soon as I am reminded, I hear a little voice in my head saying, “Other people have it worse.” Or, “At least I am healthy...” Something inside me is determined to minimize my experience of loss or to keep it quiet in case it seems like I’m complaining. No one is telling me to do this, it’s something that has been long conditioned and coaxed, a voice that is afraid of

meeting the grief head on or afraid of getting lost in it or ashamed of how big these feelings can be or a little bit of all of those things.

I don't know about you, but when I deny a part of myself or try to ignore part of my feelings or experience, there is an impact. Often that impact is unexpected and I can't fully see it until it has already happened. For me, this past year, in trying to stuff down the grief that kept bubbling out of me, I look back and realize one of the impacts was that I also had a harder time being with other people in their grief. I reached out less. I felt antsy when things got heavy. I thought I was just putting up barriers between me and my own loss, but it ended up impacting other relationships, cutting me off from a part of how I connect and care for people I love.

I'm thinking about grief and reflecting on the ways I have struggled with it in this last year because I know I'm not the only one - many of you have shared similar struggles - but also because we are quickly approaching the first year anniversary of COVID being in the United States, in our towns, and in our church. Sunday, March 1st, 2020 was the last time we passed the peace in worship by shaking hands and hugging each other. March 8th was the last time we worshipped together in person, in our sanctuary. March 15th was the last time the choir sang together without assembling and editing together their voices.

In between those dates work places scattered from a central office to cobbled together screens in our dining rooms and guest rooms and any quiet corner in our house we could find. Students came home from school one day and many never left again. Weddings were rescheduled, vacations were canceled, and technology-reluctant boomers became highly-proficient Zoomers. It's been one year not since our lives changed, but since they kept changing as we navigated constant shifts, learnings, and holy experiments into keeping each other safe and healthy and alive.

Hope Edelman wrote an op ed in the Washington Post this week that talked about how pandemic grief could become its own health crisis. She writes that each covid-19 death has affected an estimated nine survivors, leaving more than 4.5 million Americans grieving loved ones lost to the virus, and that doesn't include all the other fatalities and losses accumulated in the last year. Edelman writes, "Yet there has been no sustained outpouring of public support for mourners, as happened after the devastation of 9/11. Instead of a broad acknowledgment of mass distress, our nation has been mute with grief. Pandemic skepticism has also disparaged the losses some have experienced. This is a precarious state for a nation. Grief is cyclical, especially around anniversary dates. Even under optimal conditions, many mourners experience a dip in functioning at the one-year mark. We should expect this to happen, starting this month, with the one-year anniversaries of the first wave of pandemic deaths and lockdowns. One year isn't far on the long arc of adjustment, but it's well beyond the point that most people expect visible mourning to last. Collectively failing to grant each other permission to express distress beyond the first weeks after a loss can have profound health consequences."

This wave of first year anniversaries comes to us in the church in the early weeks of Lent, a season that calls us to reconnect with ourselves and our God, a season that calls us to listen. The gospel stories we read today are about listening even when you are being told a hard truth or someone is sharing their pain with you. Jesus is telling people about the suffering he is going to experience, trying to both prepare them and share what kind of space his head and heart are in, but his disciple Peter does not want to hear it.

Maybe this kind of talk scares Peter. Maybe he only wants good, happy things for Jesus.

Maybe he thinks that he is being a source of comfort by discouraging dwelling on pain. Peter says to Jesus, “Shh! Stop saying that! You’re scaring people - no one wants to hear about pain and suffering. Tell them some more good news.”

Jesus quickly chastises Peter. He says that Peter has his mind on human things, not divine things. Jesus is explaining that there is something divine or holy to be found when we open ourselves up to our own and other people’s pain, when we listen to the stories of what we have gone through or the fears we carry of what is to come. To be human is to want to move as far away from grief and sorrow as possible, but there is something sacred about honoring our grief and tending to it.

Again, as the story continues into a scene we read just two weeks ago when Connie Detjen offered a beautiful reflection, we see Peter being confronted with something that is difficult for him to comprehend. Peter is up on a mountaintop with Jesus and a few others, and Jesus is transfigured. Peter sees Jesus standing alongside images of their ancestors, Elijah and Moses. Perhaps this makes Peter realize that one day his friend and leader will be gone, only alive as an ancestral spirit. Whatever fears of loss or uncertainty it raises, Peter’s response is to do something - to build dwelling to mark the moment and perhaps distract from the emotions bubbling up. The air shifts and God speaks to Peter saying, “Stop! Pay attention! Do you not see Jesus before you, my beloved son? Listen to him.” Stop trying to make it better, stop trying to distract yourself, stop trying to do something and listen.

Friends, God calls us to listen. Listen to the grief when it arrives on our doorsteps. Listen to the hard emotions that live within us. Listen to each other share the stories of loss and change

and uncertainty that have shaped our last year collectively and individually. Don't act. Don't fix. Don't minimize it. Listen and tend to what is present, even when it is painful.

Writer Laura Fanucci wrote in a blog post this week on the anniversary of the deaths of her twin infant daughters:

"There's no good way to go through hardest days, but there are still a thousand wandering ways through. I've tried many, but each year I am humbled to relearn that there's no getting good at grief. You cannot write your way to a tidy conclusion. You cannot exercise any satisfying success. You cannot make meaning enough to heal the wound. You cannot get over it. You can only sit at the edge of the shore, where water meets land and death meets life, and let every wave crash into you again."

As we say goodbye to February and enter into March, this month of many memories and anniversaries, may we listen to each other, listen to ourselves, and listen to the still, small voice of God encouraging us to pay attention. Let us tell the stories of this past year. Let us tend to the grief that we have tried to ignore and silence and hope would go away on its own. The work of grief is holy, sacred work, work we are called to do together again and again. May it be so.

Amen.