

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT - 3 REMOVING OUR DEFENSES AGAINST DEATH

(08/07/16)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 5:4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4)

What an absolutely beautiful summer day! Let’s talk about death. More specifically, let’s talk about mourning, which is a healthy response to death.

This summer we are keying off the passage in the 6th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where Paul encourages his parishioners to put on “the whole armor of God” in preparation for their battle with the powers and principalities. Despite the obvious appeal of the martial approach to life expressed in this passage and in hymns like “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” the metaphor of donning armor for battle has its limitations.

The function of armor, whether literal metal armor or the set of psychological defenses we have constructed from early childhood, is to protect us. Armor functions to keep us from being wounded by life and by other people. It keeps us from experiencing pain. It makes us invulnerable to “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that are so much a part of life.

However, the armor that we have consciously or unconsciously fashioned to keep us safe, to keep us from being hurt, serves to isolate us from other people and from life. Jesus tells us that we need to take off this armor if we are to grow spiritually, if we are to experience the kingdom of God. He tells us it is better to be weak than to be strong, to be humble rather than haughty, to be merciful rather than vengeful.

The Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron tells us that we need to let life touch us in what she calls our “soft spot.” If we can do this, our heart will be enlightened and our lives will be filled with peace.

This morning we will be trying to understand what Jesus meant when, in the Beatitudes, he tells us “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Mourning is the process of grieving that we experience following the death of a loved one. It is not a pleasant experience; at best it is bittersweet. The psychic pain of our loss may be so great that we actually experience it physically. And yet Jesus tells us that it is good to mourn. He tells us that through our mourning we will find comfort.

This is counter-intuitive. Sigmund Freud told us that at the most basic level we all live out of what he called the Pleasure Principle, the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain. Since mourning and grief really hurts, we should try to avoid or at least lessen the pain. We should not be trying to face into it, open our hearts to it, let this pain touch the soft spot, that spot in our heart that, thankfully, never totally hardened.

This morning I would like us to think about several ways that we commonly avoid the psychic pain of mourning. Some of these defenses are cultural. Some, I am sorry to say, are religious. As we see through these defenses against accepting the reality of death and experiencing the pain that accompanies the death of a loved one, as we come to understand how these defenses actually work against us, we are taking off a piece of the armor that will keep us from mourning, and from moving through our loss to new life.

Many years ago I knew a woman who lost her husband to cancer. Seeing the pain she was experiencing, her physician prescribed antidepressants. And they worked. Her depression lifted. However, they worked so well that she felt nothing at the time of his death. She did not cry. She moved through his funeral as if she were in a daze. She not only didn't feel pain from the loss; she didn't feel anything.

We should feel pain and depression when a loved one dies. Depression is not an illness; it is a normal, natural, and healthy way of dealing with loss. If we honor the depression, if we enter into the darkness, we will find the light and the depression will lift. If we run from it, it will chase us. It can even become chronic.

I think of a man who lost his wife to breast cancer. Her illness and death was a terrible ordeal for both of them. So the man started drinking to block out his pain, and he continued drinking after she died. He eventually developed a drinking problem. It took six years for him to get the courage to go to Alcoholics Anonymous and set aside the alcohol that he was using as a defense against some very painful feelings. When he did, he discovered that he now had to start the grieving process; he now had to face all those feelings that he had kept at arm's length. All he had done was postpone his grieving, his mourning for six years. And he had basically lost these six years of his life, six years when he was not fully present either to himself or to their children.

I think of a woman in mid-life who lost her husband in an automobile accident. A well-meaning friend advised her to keep active, to go out with friends, go back to work as

quickly. The friend also told her that it would be a good idea to pick up a hobby. This last suggestion, well meaning as it was, struck the woman as absurd. It came close to implying that her husband had had the status of a hobby that now needed to be replaced. Now I have nothing against stamp collecting, but I think Jesus would rather see her mourn than try to avoid or evade her pain by keeping busy and finding a hobby.

We are so deeply embedded in the cultural pursuit of the pleasure principle that we see pain, whether physical or emotional pain, as an injustice. It is not.

Our religious faith can lead us forward into the experience of mourning, but it can also be used as a defense. I am thinking of a woman whose son was killed by a sniper in Iraq. She was a Christian woman, a woman of deep faith, but the loss of her son had plunged her into the depths of grief.

The woman kept her son's ashes on an altar in a little prayer room that she set up in her house. She believed that if her faith were strong enough, she would be able to bring him back to life. She firmly believed this. It seemed to me that because she could not face death, because she saw death as an injustice, because she could not let go of her son and entrust him into God's hands, she was stuck in a painful, chronically depressed state of grieving. In this case, I believe her religious faith, or at least her faith as she understood it, was not helping her to mourn, to move through the experience of death into resurrection, into new life.

I don't like to criticize Jesus, but I think he did two stupid things. I think they were well intentioned, but I wish he hadn't done them. The first was when he brought the little girl back to life. The second was when he brought Lazarus back to life. I know when he did this he was moved by the parents' pain and his own pain at losing Lazarus, his friend, but he should have just accepted the pain of loss as part of life. Both the little girl and Lazarus were going to die sooner or later, just as our loved ones will die, just as all of us will die. So what was the point of resuscitating them?

Jesus did not come to keep us from experiencing the death of the body, but to show us that death can lead to resurrection, to something new. Resurrection is not the same as revival or resuscitation. In bringing these two people back to life, Jesus gave this woman ammunition for her belief that through her prayer, through her faith, she could

bring her son back from the grave. I wish Jesus hadn't done this. It just confuses the deeper message of the resurrection.

On a more positive note, I want to give you two examples of how we can grow through the pain of mourning. The first illustrates what Jean Piaget says about the process of learning. Piaget says that we start with a schema, with a system of beliefs. As we engage life we are confronted with the data of our life experience. If this data fits neatly into our system of belief, it is assimilated into it. If it does not, we have two choices. We can deny or discredit the data of our life experience and cling to our original schema. Or we can accommodate our schema to incorporate the new information. Accommodation is how we grow, not only in science but also in religion and in every area of our life.

Many years ago I saw a television interview with Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of the North Carolina senator John Edwards. Elizabeth was a deeply religious person. At the time of the interview, her breast cancer, which had been in remission, had returned.

The interviewer asked Elizabeth if she would tell us how her faith helped her deal with not only her cancer but also the death of their son in an automobile accident.

Elizabeth said that following her son's death she came to realize that she had had an implicit contract with God. She said she apparently believed that if she were a good person; if she were a good Christian; if she tithed to the church and was generous in her support of charities; if she were a good daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend; then God would take care of her and her loved ones. From everything I knew about this woman, she was all of that and more.

When Elizabeth talked about her understanding of her relationship with God, I thought she was describing a schema. That schema was confronted with the data of her life experience: the tragic loss of her son and later her own cancer. The data didn't fit the schema. It is at this point that many people turn their backs on God. They say that if our God is the kind of God that allows good people to suffer or die, then they want nothing to do with him. And so they never darken the doors of a church again.

Elizabeth's response was different. She said that she discovered that her contract with God was never valid in the first place. God does not protect our loved ones from pain and death, nor does God protect us. So she began to look more deeply into the true

meaning of life, of suffering, of Jesus' death and resurrection. By moving into and through the pain, she found a deeper relationship with God. She found a faith that would sustain her when, only a few years later, the cancer took her life.

The final example is that of a Roman Catholic nun, a good friend of mine. St. Pauline was one of six supervisors in a program of clinical pastoral education that I directed in the summer of 1975 at Foxboro State Hospital. During the course of the summer, Pauline's mother died.

We had an exceptionally strong supervisory group that met several hours each day. The group was comprised of another member of Pauline's community, the Sisters of St. Catherine of Sienna, a Sister of Notre Dame, a Jesuit priest, a Baptist minister, and a rabbi from the Reform tradition. The people in this group were deeply spiritual and also psychologically sophisticated. If you had wanted to construct a support group to help you grieve, you couldn't have done better than the group we had that summer.

And yet St. Pauline couldn't touch her grief. She was not consciously trying to hold the group at arm's length, but she couldn't talk about her mother with any degree of feeling. And Pauline was a very feeling person. She also was unable to cry, either at the funeral or in our group meetings. All of us, especially Pauline, were very confused.

One evening Pauline went to her mother's house to sort out some of her mother's possessions. When she had finished and was ready to drive back to her room at our hospital, she sat down on her mother's front porch. The moment she sat down she began to cry. She cried for maybe fifteen minutes. Then she returned to her room.

When she told us what had happened, we of course advised her to go back to her mother's porch. And she did. The second time she cried for about twelve minutes. A week later when she returned she cried for ten minutes. Finally, over the course of four weeks, she had cried out all her grief. When she sat on the steps she felt a mixture of love, gratitude, and sadness that her mother was no longer with us.

This was when I learned that grieving is a very individual process. Even though there are guidelines and stages, these do not necessarily apply to everyone and certainly not in the order that they suggest. It also taught me that in some way, perhaps in some strange way, we will be able to experience our own mourning process. When this happens, whether it comes when you look at a picture or listen to the words of a special

song, go with it. Let the tears come. To do this is to honor the mourning that will eventually bring you comfort.

Our religious faith is not meant to function as a suit of armor. It is not supposed to serve as a defense against life. Our faith, our trust in God can help us to approach the pain, the physical and emotional pain of mourning from a position of vulnerability. It allows our loved one, and the loss of our loved one, to open up the soft spot in our heart.

As we go through this process, if we do it the right way, our heart will be enlightened, we will find peace, and then we may rediscover our loved one in a totally different way.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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