

The Many Faces of Grief

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11: 28-37 by Patty Friesen (March 26/23)

Our OMC Grief Group has been meeting these past five weeks of Lent on Zoom with Wilma Derksen from Canadian Mennonite University. We have felt a part of the larger Mennonite community across Canada with their many faces of grief. There are folks grieving deaths of their spouses, children, parents, siblings; folks grieving miscarriages, diagnoses of Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and cancer; folks grieving loss of employment; folks with connections to Ukraine grieving the war, others grieving the impact of natural disasters and we all recognized we're still grieving the pandemic with the anxiety related to this time.

I'm beginning to see that we are all grieving something at any time. On any Sunday online or in person, we are the many faces of grief. Many of us are grieving our loved ones who have died recently or long ago. Many of us have accumulated so much loss by now that we don't know who we are exactly grieving. We are also grieving changes in our own bodies and unexpected changes in our lives. Grief is at the bottom of most of our anxiety, quick anger and defensiveness, restlessness and depression. It's been helpful for me to begin to see myself and others through the lens of grief. It has helped me to be more patient and understanding of myself and others.

I think I'm grieving having my mom at Bethany Manor. Don't get me wrong. She loves it there, now, and enjoys singing in the choir with Duff Warkentin, sewing for Mennonite Central Committee and eating with her friends. But her decline in health and loss of independence has been a big change for her and for me. Knowing where this is all going to end up for us, I think I have anticipatory grief for her future stages of decline and death. She would say, "stop worrying about stuff that hasn't happened yet." But she's the one who taught me well how to worry!

In our Old Testament Reading the prophet Ezekiel has been transported “by the spirit of the Lord” to “the valley of dry bones” and deposited there. In order that Ezekiel get the full impact of the sight before his eyes, Yahweh leads Ezekial round about the bones and Ezekial is rendered speechless. The first face of grief is speechlessness. When we hear of an accident, illness or death, we are often rendered speechless.

God commands Ezekiel, to prophesy to the bones, calling them to attention to hear the messenger formula (“Thus says the Lord God”). Ezekial is to announce to them their impending resurrection. The outcome is proclaimed first: God will cause “breath” or “spirit” to enter them, and they will live. This end will be accomplished as God will lay sinews upon them, binding bone to bone. Second, God will cause flesh to come upon them. Third, skin will cover the flesh. This sequencing of events reverses the process by which bodies decompose. Finally, God will infuse them with breath (or “spirit”). As a consequence, the bones will live and more importantly, the Lord's larger purpose will be accomplished: the revived people will know and acknowledge who is the Creator of bones, flesh and spirit.

Wilma Derksen from our CMU Zoom class described our whole being as made up of four parts - body, mind, heart and soul which gets fragmented in a loss. We go around in pieces which is why we who grieve have trouble with our brains and keeping track of things. It is why our body sometimes manifests grief with aches and pains and our hearts feel isolated from other people and our souls feel distant from God. The goal of grief work and work it is, is to release the sadness and confusion on the inside to the outside and begin to try to glue the fragmented pieces of ourselves back together; much like Ezekial's dry bones coming together in sinew, flesh and skin.

In John 11, in the town of Bethany, Jesus' friend Lazarus is sick. Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, also friends of Jesus sent a message to Jesus, "The one whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said. "This illness doesn't lead to death; rather it is for God's glory." Verse 5, Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." In the meantime Lazarus dies. After travel time, Jesus comes four days late. Much too late to say good-bye to Lazarus and too late to even give proper respect at a funeral. Was he in denial - one of the faces of grief - not being able to believe the reality of Lazarus' death? Jesus said he wanted God to be glorified but that seems like a bit of a gamble with these most important friendships of Jesus' life.

The passage is full of movement and emotion with Jesus arriving in Bethany and Martha coming out to him, blaming him in a typical grief response. "Lord, if you had been here, our brother wouldn't have died." Blame is a face of grief which comes so quickly with those we love most. After getting blamed by Martha, Jesus asks for Mary. She gets up and hurries to Jesus weeping and falling at his feet. Weeping and falling is another face of grief. Mary and Martha are in full mourning with body and soul. Seeing them, Jesus has a physical and emotional reaction of his own.

Commentators have struggled to interpret the words about Jesus' emotions in these verses. Christians have loved that the shortest verse in the Bible verse 35 has been traditionally interpreted, Jesus wept. It's been a comfort to us to have a Jesus who knows our tears and knows how to weep in his body and soul. The Greek verb actually is different from Mary's weeping. The Inclusive Bible uses wept and deeply moved. The Greek verb for Jesus' reaction actually

connotes anger and indignation through a physical outburst like a growl or a roar like a lion. I like that Jesus roars like Aslan from the Chronicles of Narnia.

Anger is a face of grief as well. It preaches well both ways - Jesus as sad and Jesus as mad. Who wouldn't be mad/sad at their friend dying and possibly at themselves for waiting so long to get there? Jesus may be mad/sad that there are all these extra religious people there who have intruded onto the scene, probably saying dumb things like well-meaning religious people tend to do - "oh, he's in a better place." The mad/sad Jesus is going to do something about it.

One thing we know for sure is that Lazarus isn't merely in a coma. He's been buried in a tomb for four days and when Jesus tells them to open the tomb, ever practical Martha says, Lord, already there is a stink because he's been dead for four days. They roll away the stone and in the stench, Jesus looks upward and in familial intimacy addresses God as his parent and thanks God for always hearing him. Then he shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" The spirit of God enters him and the dead man comes out, his hands and feet still bound with strips of cloth and his face still wrapped in a cloth - his decomposing flesh reforming as he went. Jesus says to the witnesses, "Unbind him and let him go." And then there is silent shock. No one says anything as they try to take in this strange sight.

What about poor Lazarus? He doesn't say anything either. What is his face of grief? Was he mad/sad that he had died or mad/sad that he had been raised from death? Maybe he didn't want to be dragged back from the other side only to have people stare at him and hold their noses. The text says some religious people believed in Jesus because of the resurrection but others went and ratted him out to the chief priests who begin the plot to kill Jesus. Ironically, they want to kill Lazarus again also. Can you imagine what Lazarus would say to that? Go for it - been there done that - Jesus will just raise me up again. You can't keep a good man down.

Jesus goes into hiding after these threats but shows up back at Bethany in chapter 12 where his friends make him dinner that Martha served and Lazarus was there at the table. What's striking about this intimate story of Jesus' friends is how quickly they return to ordinary life, sharing a meal as they had done so many times. Neglecting our bodies is another face of grief. Grief is hard on bodies and we often don't drink enough water to stay hydrated in crying nor do we feel like eating and lose weight. Practical Martha gets to work cooking with a lot of garlic and onions to cover up the smell of Lazarus sitting at the table. The physicality of his healing body and all their crying, laughing, eating bodies, especially Jesus' body, shows us the ordinariness of resurrection life. Resurrection is finding a new normal after death - nothing is the same as before but there can be a new reality that is livable and even occasionally enjoyable. Hope of some kind of new routine and new normal is another face of grief.

With Lazarus, Jesus defeats the power of death because in him the world meets the power of the love of God incarnate (cf. Rom 8:35-39). God's full sharing of power over life and death with Jesus is an expression of God's love for Jesus and for the world. Jesus' own death is a measure of this love (10:17; 15:12), because in it Jesus' power as the resurrection and the life comes to fullest expression on Easter morning.

We live in this resurrection hope as a church. Resurrection living is the daily life of the church. (Christian Century, p. 27 Mar 23). Talking and eating fasha together like Mary, Martha, Jesus and Lazarus is resurrection living. Collecting food for Friendship Inn is resurrection living. Sewing blankets is resurrection living, as is sponsoring refugees. We open our doors to pickle ballers, choirs, homeschoolers and 12-step groups. We supply care workers, accountants and nurses for hospitals and chaplains for prisons and teachers for schools. We farm and run our businesses in the most sustainable ways we can. We walk in pride parades. We vote our

consciences. We start community gardens and call seniors. We, who live like there is resurrection, will never die!

Let us pray: May the Christ who walks on wounded feet go with us on the road. May the Christ who serves with wounded hands stretch out our hands to serve. May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart, open our hearts to love. May we see the face of Christ in everyone we meet and may everyone we meet see the face of Christ in us.