

The Necessary Experience of Grief

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Psalm 13; Psalm 142
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When we talk with someone we trust about our lives, we come fairly quickly to a place where we need to talk about our losses. What we're talking about is our grief. Grief work is not work that any of us particularly want to do. It's important to say that and acknowledge that. It's also important to say and to acknowledge that grief work is work that all of us need to do. Our society generally does not have the patience, the stomach, or the courage to do grief work. Grief work can feel overwhelming. It can feel that if you break the seal on some of the grief that you're carrying around somewhere inside of yourself, if you allow that grief up into your conscious awareness, it might just drown you in its flood waters.

We might try to keep our losses just out of our field of awareness, push that awareness down inside of us somewhere, say, "Oh no you don't. You don't come up to my surface." And when we push our grief down below, it spoils and becomes foul; unattended grief does not go away, it turns into anger. Much of the anger we see in our society – on the highways, on TV and social media, in our own communities and neighborhoods – much of the anger and rage that we see and that we may ourselves feel is actually our unprocessed, unacknowledged grief over various losses we have borne.

For there is so much grief around us. It can sometimes feel like we are swimming in grief. Watching the news about Ukraine, seeing the ways that Vladimir Putin - in his anxiety and desperate need for control - is savaging the towns and cities of Kyiv and Mariupol and others, attacking shelters and theaters, bringing trauma to the families of Ukraine, all of this unleashes enormous emotions – much of it anger, but also a deep sadness, that will be with us for a long time, sadness for all of the losses that are being inflicted and the pain that is being generated.

And it's not just Ukraine. Our world is changing in so many ways. And when we have been attached in some way to the way things were, or even just found the way things were to be familiar, those changes involve losses. If you've ever tried to be a change agent in a company or organization or community group or your family, you may well have encountered people who resisted the changes you were trying to make. And if you're like most people, you may have grumbled and said, "Those stick-in-the-muds. They're just afraid of change." But a wise mentor of mine, a pastor who was nearing his own death, once told me, "Scott, people aren't afraid of change. They're afraid of loss. And change always involves some kind of loss."

Losses must be acknowledged, and they must be grieved. The problem is that grief work can feel overwhelming to us. When we're in grief, it's usually not pretty. I can remember being part of a group a few years ago, where we were processing some losses we had experienced. As I was talking about some of these losses, I was crying. And not just delicately crying. Full on, hot mess kind of crying. I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror, and I thought, "Oh my goodness. I'm a mess!" I actually thought, "Why can't I be one of those people who is beautiful and handsome when I cry?" Grief can be raw and it can be ugly. The problem is that if we don't engage our grief, if we don't metabolize it, process it, then it festers in us and becomes another block in the rage machine that is shredding our social fabric.

The good news, my friends, is that the church has resources to help us process our grief. You're never going to guess what that resource is. It's the book of Psalms. Shocker. And look at that, we're doing a sermon series on the book of Psalms! The psalms give us a script for the necessary work and ministry of grief. Out of the 150 psalms, it is generally thought that about 40% of the psalms can be classified as psalms of lament, which means that, in some way, they are giving voice to lamentation and grief, complaint and mourning. They're not always pretty, because lamentation is not always pretty. But they're real, and they're in your Bible, and the fact that they're in your Bible means that faithful people have been praying this way for thousands of years, and this is a legitimate and faithful way to pray. You have to use them, you have to read them, pray them, and make them part of your life.

However, it is very much the case that in the mainstream church, the psalms of lament are massively under-utilized. The lectionary – and I'm a lectionary fan – does a horrible job of exposing the church on a regular basis to the psalms of grief. In the lectionary, we get plenty of psalms of praise and thanksgiving, but relatively few psalms of grief. This has led generations of faithful people to assume that their grief, their losses, their anger over their losses was not a regular, legitimate topic for their conversations with God. They have assumed that when they were talking with God, they needed to pretty everything up, and they certainly shouldn't say things like, "Are you going to forget me forever, God?" the way that Psalm 13 does.

One of my seminary teachers tells of being raised in a family where being polite to God was the highest virtue. While she still does not think it is a bad thing to be polite, she says that when being polite to God was made the Most Important Thing, she ended up repressing all of her anger, rage, and grief in an effort to conform to the politeness that her family expected. As a result, she ended up in the territory of depression as a young person. Discovering the psalms in her 20s, she says, "quite literally saved my life. I never knew that people of faith were allowed to be honest like this." That same seminary teacher told me that she believes that the renewal of the church lies in recovering the use of the fullness of the psalms. The church's vitality and energy for mission will be sapped, unless and until we rediscover and reclaim the voice of the psalms. *The psalms give us a script for the necessary work and ministry of grief.*

Psalm 13 is one script for processing a loss. When we are undergoing a loss, and I have found that this is true for the great losses that are widely appreciated, as well as for the smaller losses that some people try to dismiss – when we are undergoing a loss of some kind, it can feel as though we are being forgotten. It can feel as though we are not really seen. It can feel as though something or someone is being taken away from us, in complete disregard of whether we're OK with that or not. This can happen with changes and losses in our personal lives, it can happen with changes in our society, it can happen with changes in the church. When that happens, we can do one of several things. We can tell ourselves we're fine. We can tell ourselves it's stupid and a waste of energy to be sad, that grown-ups shouldn't cry, and it wasn't that big a deal anyway. Which is to say, we can repress it. Or, we can get real mad about it, and take that anger out on the people around us. We may erupt at home over something small that someone does, or we may go on-line and act out in a variety of ways.

Or, we can put it into prayer. As Stephen Hiemstra said in Bible study this past Wednesday, we can either turn into our pain, or we can turn to God with our pain. Psalm 13, Psalm 142, and all of those other 40% of psalms choose that third option. They turn to God with their losses, and ask God to make a difference in those losses. We never know in advance what will happen when we consciously invite God into our losses. This turn can change our prayer life, and makes it into a much more engaged conversation with God. *The psalms give us a script for the necessary work and ministry of grief.*

Even positive changes in our lives can generate grief. When your child goes off to college, it is a wonderful thing, but it is also a loss. When a friend gets married, it can be a beautiful thing, but there can also be losses that are involved in this change of identity. That's not to say it's a bad thing for your child to go to college, or for a friend to get married. But if we don't acknowledge the losses that are involved, they don't go away, they just go underground. Moving into our newly renovated building is a wonderful, spectacular change that is going to leapfrog our mission forward as a congregation. And, it is a change. Rooms look different. Room may look unfamiliar for a while. It may feel like we're in a different church. It is a fantastic, generational change, and it is the case that there are certain losses inside of that change. And those changes are all happening in the context of the last two years of the global pandemic which has generated so many losses. So we can be gentle with ourselves and with others who are experiencing sadness - not our entire experience, but an ingredient in it. There's no reason to be ashamed about this. If you are going through any kind of a change in your life, and you have a pit in your stomach in the midst of it, that may well be your body's awareness of a loss that you are experiencing. So just notice it, allow it to be there, and trust that it won't overwhelm you.

When there is a world situation that is of great concern to you, a situation like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or in which one person or group is taking advantage of another, or in which someone is undergoing enormous losses, it can be a powerful thing to pray the psalms *on their behalf*. To hold them in mind, and to imagine them

praying with you as you pray psalms like Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul?” Can you feel those words in the voice of Ukrainians? Or Psalm 142: “With my voice I cry to the Lord; with my voice I make supplication to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him. When my spirit is faint, you know my way. In the path where I walk, they have hidden a trap for me. No refuge remains to me; no one cares for me.” The psalms become a script for our grief and our mourning, and they become a tangible way that we can pray for the needs of the world.

Grief is messy, it is raw, and it is real. For all of us. The church is one of the few places in our society that knows about how to process loss. Processing loss may well be one of the greatest ministries that we can do for our community. And the psalms will help us to do that. But only if we engage them individually, and corporately, in new ways in the days and years to come. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.