

You're Not Alone

Rev. Sarah Campbell

Healing Sunday

March 3, 2024

Luke 12:10-17

Rituals are strange, especially to newcomers. A newcomer with an anthropological bent might lean in, with great curiosity about this human behavior. A newcomer with a scientific, rationalist bent might eye it all skeptically and even with dismissive judgment. I confess that after 30 years of ministry, these rituals move me more deeply than ever. The symbols, the choreography, the sparse poetry that tries to speak of the ultimately unspeakable... the great mystery of these rituals passed down through the generations... it's wondrous. No, we are not fundamentalist Christians, not biblical literalists, and we are pro-science. Not a week goes by that we don't express gratitude for modern medicine. No, we hasten to explain to newcomers, we are not fundamentalist Christians, not at all... but then again... I hear David Rayson's voice saying that we *are* fundamentalists, we share a fundamental belief in the power of God's love flowing through our love.

This morning's worship, this healing Sunday, is full of rituals, full of sacred dance if you will, people moving forward towards the table to receive the bread of life; some going even deeper into the holy space, seeking anointing; some lighting candles for healing; and holding our hands up in blessing, blessing those whose life work centers around healing; and maybe wrapping and being wrapped in a prayer shawl; and this morning shaking hands again, feeling one another's flesh... how can this be?!... all of this ritual dance, here in our holy space and holy time.

This is not about the leader or leaders of worship or of this congregation. This is about the community! The healing that happens in and through community! No prima donnas here. No charismatic leaders. Only community!!

I think, I hope, I trust that you will be moved by what I'm about to share with you about an ancient ritual of Judaism, from the third century. Rather than try to explain the power of ritual, it really can't be explained to satisfy the left brain, I will simply describe this ritual, this ancient practice that reflects a deep understanding of the human psyche and spirit. Actually, I'll let rabbi Sharon Brous describe it. Let those who have ears to hear, hear, the rabbi's words:

"The text describes a pilgrimage ritual from the time of the Second Temple. Several times each year, hundreds of thousands of Jews would ascend to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious and political life. They would climb the steps of the Temple Mount and enter its enormous plaza, turning to the right en masse, circling counterclockwise.

Meanwhile, the brokenhearted, the mourners (and here I would also include the lonely and the sick), would make this same ritual walk but they would turn to the left and circle in the opposite direction: every step against the current.

And each person who encountered someone in pain would look into that person's eyes and inquire: "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?"

"My father died," a person might say. "There are so many things I never got to say to him." Or perhaps: "My partner left. I was completely blindsided." Or: "My child is sick. We're awaiting the test results."

Those who walked from the right would offer a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," they would say. "You are not alone." And then they would continue to walk until the next person approached.

This timeless wisdom speaks to what it means to be human in a world of pain. This year, you walk the path of the anguished. Perhaps next year, it will be me. I hold your broken heart knowing that one day you will hold mine.

I read in this text many profound lessons, do not take your broken heart and go home. Don't isolate. Step toward those whom you know will hold you tenderly.

And on your good days — the days when you can breathe — show up then, too. Because the very fact of seeing those who are walking against the current, people who can barely hold on, and asking, with an open heart, "Tell me about your sorrow," may be the deepest affirmation of our humanity.

It is an expression of both love and sacred responsibility to turn to another person in her moment of deepest anguish and think: "Your sorrow may scare me, it may unsettle me. But I will not abandon you. I will meet your grief with relentless love."

When your heart is broken, when the specter of death visits your family, when you feel lost and alone and inclined to retreat, you show up. You entrust your pain to the community.

We cannot magically fix one another's broken hearts. But we can find each other in our most vulnerable moments and wrap each other up in a circle of care. We can humbly promise each other, "I can't take your pain away, but I can promise you won't have to hold it alone." (Brous)

Oh how we suffer in this life..

Do you remember the phone call, when you received the devastating news about your cancer diagnosis, or a loved one's test results, or about a serious accident or death of a family member... "You know, the surreal feeling of having your life change instantly. You lived one reality before the phone call and another reality afterward." (French)

After his wife received devastating news about a highly aggressive form of cancer someone said: "It's like the difference between peace and war. In peacetime, you can dream and plan. Joy seems like an attainable goal. In wartime, you dig deep. You fight. And the goal is not joy but survival itself. Peace has its many challenges but war is emotionally shattering. The fight is so very hard and feels unending.

Imagine how much harder that fight would be if you fought it alone. But ever since the deep darkness of that phone call, he said, my spouse and I have experienced countless bursts of light shining through, each one coming through the love and care from other people." (French)

Oh, how we want to hold you in your suffering, this church, this community wants to hold you in your suffering. We want it so bad. We will never do it perfectly, and maybe not how you expect, and never enough... but it's real, the care, the love.. it's real.

Thank God the bent over woman didn't stay home that day, that she went to synagogue. It probably took courage for her to do so. But she did it. And Jesus sees her. He has eyes that search out those who are suffering. We don't know if it actually happened this way, if her bones, or muscles, or brain was in that moment cured... we don't know about cure, we may even doubt it, but we know the story is true, that she experienced healing. She was not alone. Her suffering was known by another. And she felt love. And maybe, let's wonder, in weeks to come, when she shows up at synagogue, that *she* is able to somehow look into an other's eyes, and see their suffering, and ask them "What happened to you? Why does your heart ache?" and then she offers a blessing: "May the Holy One comfort you," "You are not alone."

It's so odd, this story, and it feels so wrong, and stories like this, did it really happen that way? That certain leaders of the synagogue would be indignant about this healing on the sabbath? I don't know about that... After all! What else is sabbath for? What is community for? If not to show for one another to heal our hearts together in this life full of suffering....

But it's not only on sabbath day. The choreography of communal care happens throughout the week. (It's the entire church that does pastoral care.)

-the leaning in and listening of a Befriender over a spot of tea

-the handing over of the hotdish in the doorway

-the knitting of a prayer shawl

-the praying of those on the prayerways ministry team, each in their heart's secret room, praying for someone they may not even know. Don't you dare, oh media, demean the expression "you are in my thoughts and prayers". Yes, we are a church that acts for justice, but we also pray for the hearts of those who suffer. To be in someone's thoughts and prayers means the world when you feel alone in your suffering.

When you are in the freefall of suffering, just after getting that phone call with devastating news, may you know that the safety net is here and we will catch you, no matter what happens.

We got you. You are not alone.....

Sources

Borg, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time*, Harper, 1994.

Brous, Sharon, "Two Lessons From an Ancient Text That Changed My Life", *New York Times*, January 21, 2024.

French, David, "Shared Sorrow Is Half Sorrow", *New York Times*, January 8, 2024.

