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Proper 28B

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Get Into It

In his book, Let your Life Speak, spiritual guide, Parker Palmer shares an experience he had while participating in an Outward-Bound program. Palmer was taken to the edge of a cliff over 100 feet above solid ground. Once there, they tied a rope around his waist and told him that his task was to back down the cliff. Palmer asked his instructor: "Well, what do I do?" The instructor in typical Outward-Bound style said, "Just go!" So down he went, slamming onto a small ledge with considerable force. The instructor, looking down at him commented: "I don't think you quite have it yet.... The only way to do this is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the rock face so you'll have the full weight on your feet."

Palmer was skeptical of the advice and instead decided to hug the rock face as much as he could. So, he tried again and BOOM—he hit the next ledge. "You still don't have it!" came the instructor's voice. "Lean way back and take the next step." Which is what Palmer did and for a moment it worked. He was making progress taking very small steps and moving down the rock face. When he got about halfway down, another instructor called up: "Parker," she said, I think you better stop and look at what's happening beneath your feet." Very slowly he lowered his eyes, and he saw a large hole opening up beneath him. To get around the hole, he was going to have to change directions. It was at this point that he became overcome with terror and completely froze. After a little while, this same second instructor called up: "Parker is there anything wrong?" And in a high squeaky voice, came Palmer's words: "I don't want to talk about it." "Then I think it's time you learned the motto of the Outward-Bound School" the instructor said. "Oh great," he thought. "I'm going to die and she's going to share a motto with me." But then she yelled up, "Our motto is, 'if you can't get out of it, get into it.'"

As Palmer said, "My instructor's words seemed so profoundly true to me in this existential moment" that they "bypassed my argumentative mind, bypassed my frozen emotions, bypassed my shattered ego, bypassed my stuck willpower, and went directly

into my body where they moved my feet which proceeded to take me safely to the ground.”

This week as my departure from you became a reality, awash with feelings of sudden grief I recalled this story and the Outward-Bound Motto, “If you can’t get out of it, get into it.” These words, I believe, serve as an invitation in this season of leave-taking. Yes, we’re still weary from the past two years. And now that we are slowly finding our way out of the pandemic we may feel as Palmer did when his body slammed into the ledge of the rock face. BOOM! Another massive change in our collective lives - the ending of our pastoral relationship as priest and people. “Emily, I thought you’d be with us forever. Or at least until Maggie graduated from high school,” I’ve heard from many of you. And at times along our journey, I shared this same sentiment. And yet, deep down in our heart of hearts we knew that that this pastoral relationship would take place for a discreet amount of time, and it would someday need to come to an end. As with all other endings, we must now do the hard and holy work of tending to the loss.

It is important to recognize that we are all grieving in our own way. Some of you don’t know St. Peter’s without me, Daniel or Maggie. While others have experienced the arrival and departure of many rectors and their families. While still others may have experienced this kind of leave-taking, but in another community of faith. Canon Benoit-Joseph who helps congregations in times of transition told our Wardens this week that the grief Daniel, Maggie and I will feel may be quite different from yours. After December 12 you all will have each other to lean on for support and comfort. We will enter a new community taking our grief with us among people we have yet to form relationships. In this moment we find ourselves in different stages and manifestations of our collective grief—disbelief, anger, silence, the need to do something, the need to exert some kind of control in a world that feels out of control—and so we have to be patient and gentle with one another, gracious when our grief is manifested differently than our fellow parishioner.

In today’s Gospel passage we encounter a family in profound grief with Jesus standing in the very center of it. Martha’s reaction to her brother’s death is what makes the most sense to me in this story. It is reasonable that she wants to understand what’s happening. In this out of control, scary world in which she finds herself, she wants to manage the situation and bring order amid the chaos. If she can somehow make sense of it all, then

maybe she will feel a little less out of control, a little less afraid, and a little less heartbroken.

It is tempting for us to move quickly to the end of the story - emphasizing the miracle. To realize that there was a plan all along. In our hesitation to linger in that place of Martha's anguish and discomfort we overlook one of the most amazing moments in the Gospels. Overcome with grief, Jesus wept. Jesus wept for his friend lying in the tomb. Jesus wept for Mary and Martha and all who were heartbroken. Jesus wept for the world and the enormity of its suffering; and he may have even wept for himself journeying ever closer to the cross. Before Jesus commanded his friend to come out of the tomb, he broke down and cried. One writer says that Jesus' tears sanctified ours. In his weeping, he honored our human need to weep.

During the early days of the pandemic Sr. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and spiritual writer offered this reflection on the holiness of grief. "Few of us see our weeping as a spiritual gift or a matter of divine design. But we are wrong. Weeping is very holy and life giving. It sounds alarms for a society and wizens the soul of the individual. If we do not weep on the personal level, we shall never understand humanity around us. If we do not weep on the public level, we are less than human ourselves. Tears explode in the midst of humanity to give us all a chance to become more human than we ever could have without them. If we do not allow ourselves to face and feel pain, we run the risk of entombing ourselves in a plastic bubble where our lies about life shrink our hearts and limit our vision. It is not healthy to insist that our deep hurts and appalling losses do not exist. On the contrary. To weep tears about them may be to take our first real steps toward honesty. Weeping, in fact, may be the best indicator we have of what life is really about for us. It may be only when we weep that we can come to know best either ourselves or our worlds."

I know you've heard me say it in countless sermons over the past 12 years, "Grief is the price we pay for love". We have accompanied one another through times of sickness and sorrow, celebration and joy. We have laughed and prayed and played and served alongside one another. Our present grief is a sign of how well we have loved. In these final days of our ministry together, let's give one another the gracious space to be shocked, confused and angry, to want to do something, to want to wait, to pray, to be afraid, to be grateful and hopeful, to lament, to hold tight to one another

and to need time alone. For God comes to us and shares the fullness of our human emotions and experience. Weeping is an important part of being fully alive in this world, Jesus shows us. So, let us lean into this uncomfortable and yet holy experience of grief. Let us do this work of leave-taking so that we can take hold the new life God has in store for us.

Let us pray.

God of honest emotions

God of cathartic tears,

it would be sadder if in these days

we didn't need a good cry,

a release from the body,

a moment to name how it feels.

We thank you that these tears

are not tears of weakness

but of witness.

They speak to a God

who wept as we do,

and showed us

human love is divine. Amen.

Today's prayer comes from the Corrymeela Peace Community in Northern Ireland: 27 March, 2020.