

Message for May 22, 2022

by Karen Barale, Grief Team Leader, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Olympia

The Holy Gospel according to John, the fourteenth chapter, verses 23-29

²³ Jesus answered [Judas (not Iscariot),] “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. ²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate,^[a] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

In 2018, I worked with Pastor Molly to develop a bereavement ministry team. I’m a retired WSU professor, and after retirement I trained at the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Ft Collins, Colorado, receiving a Certificate in Death and Grief Studies. I currently lead the Grief Team here at Gloria Dei. Eventually loss finds us all, in some way, shape or form. Council asked me to provide a message around grief and loss. And that is why I am here today.

When Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to a close; when he knew that his life and teachings were leading him to the cross, he gathered with his closest friends and shared the words in today’s gospel. I wonder what the disciples were thinking when they heard those words. Jesus has told them about significant changes to come and that he is leaving them. It seems a bit confusing or ambiguous.

Neither ambiguity nor loss are popular topics in our culture, and I doubt they were popular in the disciple’s time, either.

Now especially with the pandemic, we are immersed in both.

When the pandemic started in March 2020, we could not have imagined the path we would follow – losing our normal routines and in-person connections. And there have been so many losses – some are very clear, such as the loss of a loved one. The grief team has had 43 families in our congregation on our caring list since the pandemic time began. As I prepared these words, I listened online to the tolling of the funeral bell at the Washington National Cathedral, tolling for 1 hour and 34 minutes. That was 1000 tolls, each toll representing 1000 deaths - a tragic 1 million lives lost to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been other significant losses:

- Loss of a job, a business, income, retirement savings, security about food and shelter
- Separation and/or divorce

This worldwide health crisis brought many ambiguous losses. What do I mean by that? Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear and without immediate resolution, which may never be achieved. We don't think of this as grief.

Here are some ambiguous losses we have experienced over the past two years:

- Loss of certainty about safety and health for you and family
- Loss of playdates for children and at-school learning
- Loss of parental time due to the need for at-home schooling for children
- Loss of ability to be with a loved one who is hospitalized and/or dying
- Loss of traditional rituals of mourning and burial
- Loss of ability to celebrate major life events births, graduations, marriages
- Loss of ability to attend large events, like concerts or sports
- Loss of control of how much time is spent with family (too much, too little)
- Loss of trust in the world as a fair and just place
- Loss of freedom to move about as we please

Ambiguous losses are pervasive, but we rarely acknowledge them because we often think of them as just part of life. While all loss is stressful, ambiguous loss adds another layer of stress because both the loss and grief are frozen. All too often then, people simply wait for things to get back to normal, for the loss to be recovered. Sadly, that doesn't always happen.

To these layers of loss, add four of our staff members leaving us. In March 2021, Pastor Molly went on leave from call to pursue her dream. This January Beth Heitz retired after 27 years of faithful service as our office administrator. Pastor Doug has just retired from full-time ministry after 13 years as our senior pastor. And at the end of the month, Pastor Phil, who has served most recently as our visitation pastor, is leaving us.

So. Much. Loss. It's overwhelming. Our society places enormous pressure on us to get over loss, to get through grief. Yet losses never acknowledged remain unresolved. Identifying and acknowledging what we have lost is important, whether clear or ambiguous. We know that we grieve after the loss of a loved one or a dear friend. We also need to allow the time and space to mourn the ambiguous losses and our staff loss. So, what should we do?

To start, let's define grief and mourning. Grief is all those internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies or when we experience any significant loss. In other words, grief is everything

we naturally think and feel on the inside after a loss. Mourning, on the other hand, is when we take our inner grief and express it outside of ourselves. Another way to think of it is that mourning is 'grief gone public.' Example of mourning are talking about the loss, crying, expressing thoughts and feelings through journaling, art, or music, or and celebrating special dates.

I want to share with you six needs of mourning that may help us as we move forward individually and as a congregation.

[The first need of mourning is to acknowledge the reality of the loss.](#)

Jesus tells the disciples many times that he will be leaving; but as of yet he is still with them. They are not yet at the point of acknowledging the loss, but they are anticipating the loss. Those of you who have experienced a long illness before a loved one dies will understand this type of loss.

For our departing staff, we are of course happy for them in their new journeys and want to wish them well. These people, who have provided leadership for our congregation and often supported us personally, will no longer do that. But, with each announced departure, I felt a loss and sadness, and I know others did, too.

Acknowledging loss often begins with a ritual. For a death, it's a funeral, memorial and/or a graveside service. We lost that opportunity during COVID times; this has compounded people's grief.

When pastors and staff have left our congregation, we have honored their time with us during an event. For Pastor Molly, we had a drive thru farewell. For Beth, it was a coffee between. For Pastor Doug, a BBQ and gathering time. And for Pastor Phil, we will have a Pie Potluck next Sunday.

How do we acknowledge the more ambiguous COVID losses? How do we make sense of it and begin to heal? Likely, we all agree that we'll never forget this time. Continued conversation around these COVID losses helps us recognize and acknowledge the past two year and the emotional toll it has taken, especially as we begin to understand the systemic changes that are needed to make life better for all.

[The second need is to embrace the pain of the loss.](#)

Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of the pain. We don't talk about our losses. No one wants to go through a painful, confusing time. Some of you might remember when I introduced the grief team in 2019, where I invited you on a journey with no map or GPS, no destination, no knowledge of when or where we would arrive. No one wanted to go. That is the journey of grief. We often avoid dealing with grief after death because it easier to repress or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it on a grief journey.

The pain is hardest when you lose a loved one. We tend to congratulate people who remain "strong" and "in control." Society says they are "doing well" with loss and grief. In reality, doing well with grief means recognizing and becoming well acquainted with the pain so that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it. And that means sitting with the pain, not running away from it, not using drugs or alcohol to blot it out, not stuffing it down and ignoring it.

You may think that the idea of sitting with pain is overkill when it comes to staff members leaving. However, it's important for all of us to remember that our remaining staff are grieving the loss of their colleagues, changes in their responsibilities, and the ambiguity of a major change. Being aware of their feelings, listening and expressing compassion provides needed support.

Jesus gives the disciples the gift of peace. He offers that gift to us, also. This peace can sustain and comfort us as we work through the pain of loss.

[The third need is to remember the loss](#)

Grief is a paradox. You have to go back and remember the loss before you can go forward into the future. Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible.

When we know someone is grieving, we might say (trying to be helpful), "don't think about it – that's in the past". These memories are important steppingstones as we consider where we have been.

As we transition to the post-pandemic world, we need to remember all those ambiguous losses we have faced. Remembering these layers of loss helps us to have compassion and empathy for ourselves and others.

Our congregation will be working with the Transition Team on our Ministry Profile and Congregational History. We need to remember the contributions of pastors and staff who have recently left us; their time with us has shaped who we are today.

Jesus tells the disciples that he will send the Holy spirit to teach them and remind them of all that he has said to them. This same Holy Spirit is with us, reminding us of Jesus words as we remember our losses.

[Need number 4 is to develop a new self-identity](#)

When you lose a loved one, your self-identity changes. You may go from a wife or husband to a widow or widower; from a parent to a bereaved parent. You must take on new roles that you may not have done before. Change is hard! We just want them back. We see this with the pandemic changes, too. Can't we just go back to normal? And at times we find that we can't. We have to search for new ways to manage and a new identity.

When pastors leave, the congregational identity and character naturally changes. Individually, our remaining staff and volunteers confront a changed identity every time they do something that was previous done by the person who left. This can be very hard work. We also have interim staff coming to work with us, and that will result in more identity and role changes.

Now is the "in-between time" for us. As noted in the Synod Call Manual, we are entering into a process of discernment. This process has its roots in the New Testament community described in the book of Acts. Throughout Acts, at every point of development of the new Christian Church, the Spirit was there doing the leading with the church members. The Spirit led Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch to interpret God's word and baptize him. The Spirit led Paul and his companions to each city of his missionary

journeys. The Church lived its life as a life of discernment. How did the Spirit lead? How did people know God's will? Luke wrote in Acts that the Spirit came to both individuals and groups, during worship, prayer, preaching of God's word, at baptism, and other ways including within group processes of deliberation and conversation. This is the journey we are embarking on now. We are seeking God's will for our future ministry and the pastoral staff for that ministry. The Spirit will continue to come to us as those who believe and trust in God and listen for God's voice.

[The fifth need is to search for meaning](#)

With so many losses happening at once, it's not unusual to ask "How could God let this happen?" "Why did this happen now, in this way?" Loss reminds us of our lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless. It's a time when you ask a lot of "How?" and "Why" questions as you search for some meaning.

As a congregation, we have struggled through two years of pandemic restriction. Many found meaning and purpose in helping people stay healthy; in serving others through our ministries, such as the community kitchen, or supporting those in care facilities through phone calls and mail.

Yet some people may be asking now - why come back to church? The pastors are gone, I developed other routines for Sunday mornings. How will it help me to go back?

We are returning to more in-person connections and beginning the walk through our transition and discernment process. Let's search for new meaning and identity as a congregation together through conversation, encouragement, and prayer.

[Need 6: Receiving ongoing support from others](#)

The type of support we get during a grief journey can have a major influence on our capacity to heal. We cannot do this alone! And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support should not end after a memorial, an announcement of the pandemic becoming endemic, or a staff farewell event.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus tells us that he is sending the Holy Spirit, or the advocate – that is one who is always with us, the Comforter, who will continue to teach and guide us. This is support that we can count on, no matter what is happening in our lives.

[Reconciling your grief](#)

People do not "get over" grief. There is no closure. Mourners reconcile their grief as they work to integrate the new reality of a life that has been changed by loss. Feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften. Hope for a continued life will emerge.

This is true for us as a congregation, also. We will gradually integrate our pastoral and staff changes and the changing pandemic times into a new normal for us as a community. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 67 is a prayer reminding us that God blesses us and continues to bless us.

Today, as we acknowledge our losses, we hear Jesus' promise again. "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not let them be afraid." This peace offers us both *comfort* for troubled hearts and *courage* in the midst of difficult times.

I would like to close today with a prayer from our Lutheran book of worship.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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