

Third Sunday in Lent (C) / February 28, 2016
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church / Creve Coeur, Missouri
The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, D.Min., Priest Associate

DEATH, LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT

"Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves...."

This opening phrase from the collect puts it very bluntly, but very truthfully.

We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.

The Church and scripture teach us the truth of our ultimate dependence on God. It is a truth we do not hear easily, because it flies in the face of so much that we would pretend.

- We pretend to self-sufficiency, especially in American culture of the 21st century.
- We value strength and independence, as if by our own might and power we might make it through life.

But, ultimately, we do not have sufficient power in ourselves to help ourselves. Indeed, our dependence upon the mercy and power of God is nowhere more evident than when we go through the experience of death, loss and bereavement. Our living and our dying belong to God.

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Back in January, I told Fr. Marvin that I'd preach this Sunday about death and loss, how we grieve, and the spiritual dimensions of bereavement. It seemed a fitting topic for a Sunday in Lent which began Ash Wednesday with the message: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

I also wanted to anticipate our Adult Forum on end-of-life hospice care from the St. Luke's hospice program on March 20th.

But there was no way I could anticipate that our services this weekend would be book-ended between the funerals of two beloved parishioners: the Rev. Dr. Roy Moore on Saturday and Tommy Gordon on Monday. And, of course, we have the service for Bev Buder yet to come on Friday, March 11th.

Our parish has been no stranger to loss and grief.

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In the first lesson today, a burning bush brings Moses into the presence of God. The overwhelming experience of a blazing bush that is not consumed by the fire is the means by which Moses experiences God touching his life. He is told take the sandals from his feet; he is on holy ground.

For many of us, the death of someone we've known and loved is a burning bush experience, when we acutely feel the presence of God. I observed this holy ground of death repeatedly during the 20+ years that I was involved in hospice ministry. When death touches the life of a family or an individual, even those who don't think they believe in God, feel touched by the sanctity and mystery that surrounds a death.

For those who do have faith, death marks a passage from this life into the nearer Presence of God. Experiencing the death of a loved one or anticipating our own underscores that we do not have sufficient power in ourselves, but turn to the mercy of God to hold us and heal us in the face of loss.

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There are so many lessons I learned working with death, dying and bereavement, but let me just share three important perspectives.

In his book, *DYING WELL: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life* (Riverhead Books, 1997), Ira Byock explored how it is possible for persons to actually strengthen bonds with those they love and experience moments of profound meaning even in the face of possible death.

A hospice physician, he maintains that the patient and those who love him/her can use the final months, weeks and days to talk at a deeper level about important relationship matters. He suggests that there are five aspects of a relationship that can be mutually communicated to bring about as good a closing as possible. These are:

1. "I forgive you."
2. "Forgive me."
3. "Thank you."
4. "I love you."
5. "Goodbye."

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Second perspective comes from Dr. Dennis Klass, a professor of psychology at Webster University who along with others published a book titled, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Taylor Francis, 1996). This book challenged the prevailing thought that a griever must get over a loss, let go, move on and not live in the past. But

what he discovered in his work, particularly with bereaved parents who'd lost a child was that they continued to feel connected to their child in a special way. He found that healthy grievers remembered their loved ones, told stories and kept a bond going that was a source of solace and comfort. They had not denied the death, but they had not detached from their love. They kept their loved one in a special place in their heart and mind.

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In today's Gospel Jesus reminds us in the parable of the fig tree that our life has a purpose -- it is to bear fruit. We are to repent and give our life to fruitfulness.

What is fruitfulness when it comes to living, grieving and dying? I think it means that our living, our dying and, even our grieving, belong to God. Fruitfulness results when we recognize that life is not our own, but that God creates and gives life, and that all of life is in and of God.

Let me share a wonderful story from Henri Nouwen's book *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (Harper Collins, 1994). (p.19)

...a story about twins talking to each other in the womb. The sister (twin) said to the brother, "I believe there is life after birth." Her brother protested vehemently: "No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us." The little girl insisted, "There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move." Still she could not convince her twin brother.

After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, "I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe that, either, but I think there is a mother." Her brother became furious. "A mother!" he shouted. "What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let's be content."

The sister was quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while didn't dare say anything more. But she couldn't let go of her thoughts, and since she had only her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, "Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful."

"Yes," he answered. "What's special about that?" "Well," the sister said, "I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother fact-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?"

The brother didn't answer. He was fed up with the foolish talk of his sister and felt that the best thing would be simply to ignore her and hope that she would leave him alone.

This metaphor story helps us recognize that even when we cannot imagine it, that our life is in and of God.

We can live life -- including our response to the experience of loss and grief -- as if this is all that is and all that can be known -- which would be a despairing sense that "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves."

Or we can claim our divine childhood and live our life in fruitfulness, in gratefulness, and in response to that Divine Love which gives us birth.

Fruitfulness means that all is God's, all is from God, and all will return to God.

God grant us the faith and confidence to know this, and live this. AMEN.