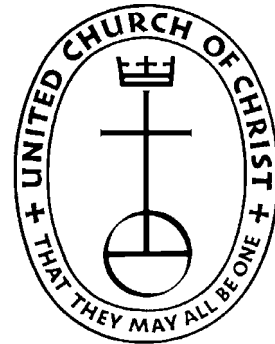


Mourning Our Losses

A Sermon By —
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This sermon tells of learnings from stories of the disciples' loss of Jesus: we must be willing to openly and honestly grieve; we must deliberately choose gratitude over resentment; and mourning our losses needs to take place in the context of community.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Mourning Our Losses

Mother's Day – a day to affirm family and to celebrate those who have nurtured and supported us. We think about both nurturing mothers and nurturing fathers, about traditional families, but also about a rainbow of diverse loving families.

Now although festivals honoring mothers can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, it was just over a century ago that this American holiday was created. The initial idea came from Julia Ward Howe, an abolitionist and peace advocate. In 1861, Mrs. Howe traveled to Washington. One night she awoke suddenly, her mind filled with thoughts of the “hundred circling camps” of Union soldiers visible from her hotel room. She could hear the sound of “the trumpet that shall never call retreat.” So she wrote her hymn, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, about freedom.

The painful and bloody Civil War, with its incredible cost of human life, finally ended, but soon thereafter the Franco-Prussian War began. Julie Ward Howe said:

I was visited by a sudden feeling of the cruel and unnecessary character of war. It seemed a return to barbarism, the issue having been one which might easily have been settled without bloodshed. The question forced itself upon me, “Why do not the mothers of humanity interfere in these matters to prevent the waste of human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?”

So she began to think of a global appeal to women, a Mother's Day in which all mothers would march for peace. She planned an event in Boston and issued this proclamation:

Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts! Say firmly: “Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience.

We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. ... Let women bewail and commemorate the dead, and solemnly counsel with each other as the means whereby the human family can live in peace.

Her dream was of a day when mothers would turn their experiences of loss into opportunities for peace. But that idea didn't catch on. Later, Anna Jarvis wanted to honor her mother, who had healed some of the rifts between Confederate and Union supporters, who had helped people on both sides of the Civil War mourn their losses. She got support from several political leaders, and finally the idea of a Mother's Day did catch on and became an official holiday with a direct connection to the losses caused by war.

On this Mother's Day, I want to reflect on losses – not in war as much as in all of life itself –

and I want to do so by returning to the scripture passages Libby and I used on Easter.

First, I will read from the Gospel of Peter, a collection of ancient fragments found in the 19th century. Peter, the narrator talks about the experience of losing Jesus:

We twelve disciples, continued to weep and mourn. All of us, still grieving on account of what happened, left for our own homes. I, Simon Peter and Andrew my brother, took our fishing nets and went away to sea."

Jesus' closest followers had given up everything to join his Jewish reform movement. They dreamed with him of an Empire of God that was greater than the oppressive Empire of Rome. But then Rome crucified Jesus and the dream seemed to end. Mourning their losses, the disciples returned home.

Libby's Easter scripture came from Luke, the story of two disciples returning to their home in Emmaus. Instead of reading the biblical text, I want to read the story as told by a Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen.

Two people are walking together. You can see from the way they walk that they are not happy. Their bodies are bent over, their faces downcast, their movements slow. They do not look at each other. Once in a while they utter a word, but their words are not directed to each other. The words vanish in the air as useless sounds. They return to their home, but their home is no longer home. Home has become emptiness, disillusionment, despair.

They can hardly imagine that it was only a few years ago when they had met someone, Jesus of Nazareth, who had changed their lives, who had radically interrupted their daily routines and brought a new vitality to every part of their existence. He made them into people for whom the world was no longer a burden, but a challenge, no longer a field of snares but a place with endless opportunities. He brought joy and peace to their daily experience. He made their life a dance.

Now he is dead. His body that had radiated light had been destroyed under the hands of his torturers. He had become a nobody among nobodies. They lost him. Not just him, but, with him, also themselves. They had become two lost human beings, walking home without having a home.

The experience of loss.

I just finished a fascinating novel by Stephen Lovely entitled *Irreplaceable*. It began with a young woman, Isabel, dying after her bicycle was hit by a truck. Told primarily through the voices of her husband and mother, it is a story of deep and profound mourning for one who was irreplaceable. Isabel was an organ donor and her heart went to another woman, Janet, saving that woman from certain death. But the novel made it clear that Janet's life, and the life of her husband, children and parents, had also been filled with loss, both before the transplant with her failing heart and after the

transplant as her body kept trying to reject the new heart. Even the truck driver who hit Janet found his life was radically changed by the loss of Isabel.

Most of us know what it is like to lose someone or something of great value.

Many here today have had to deal with the death of a loved one. We gathered in this sanctuary last Sunday afternoon for a magnificent celebration of the life of Kenia Casarreal. Warm, rich feelings were shared in the reception that followed. But now that's over and Jake goes to bed alone at night; Kimberly and Leo no longer pick up the phone to hear their mother's voice. The loss is real and painful. Many of you know the pain of losing a parent, a child, a life-long partner, a dear friend.

Or there are losses that accompany the end of relationships – divorce, separation, estrangement. Losses that mean an end to a particular set of dreams for the future. Losses that may come with betrayal or painful words that can't be erased from memory.

Or there are lost jobs or failures in school. Losses that tear asunder self-esteem and that forever altar life plans.

Or the loss that comes when a child leaves home, even in the best of circumstances, because home now seems empty; there's a very real void.

Or there are the losses attached to growing older. This week at Dodger stadium, I left my seat, and returning found that the seats around Kay's and mine had been occupied. However, the row in front was still empty, so I walked down that row, lifted my leg up over a chair to climb up to my seat – and quickly realized it's different doing that in my 60s than it was in my 30s. As people age, there are losses of hearing, sight, mobility, memory – difficult losses.

And this congregation has experienced a heart-wrenching loss in the last couple weeks. At the most agonizing, painful church meeting I have ever attended, our Church Council ended the employment of Dr. Lee Vail, our Minister of Music. Dr. Vail has been a beloved member of this faith community and its professional staff for almost four decades. He has given so much of his life to this church for which he has such a deep love.

Those Council members who had to make an impossible decision, eyes red from crying at the end of that meeting, are today feeling profound loss. Lee, his mother, his closest friends are feeling deep and devastating loss. Members of this congregation, not quite sure what happened and not able to know because of confidentiality requirements, are in some cases angry and bitter, but mostly just sad, really sad, mourning that loss.

Henri Nouwen, whose description of the disciples en route to Emmaus I read earlier, wrote a helpful book about loss entitled *With Burning Hearts*. I opened that book once again this week trying to cope with my own sense of the loss of Lee. Nouwen said:

Sometimes it seems that life is just one long series of losses. When we were born, we lost the safety of the womb, when we went to school we lost the security of family life, when we got

our first job we lost the freedom of youth, when we got married we lost the joy of many options and when we grew old we lost our good looks, our old friends, and our fame.

The losses that settle themselves deeply in our hearts and minds are the loss of intimacy through separation, the loss of safety through violence, the loss of innocence through abuse, the loss of friends through betrayal, the loss of love through abandonment.

So how do we cope with those losses. Well, it seems to me there are three hints in that story of Jesus' two followers walking toward Emmaus. **First, they grieved openly; they were honest with themselves about the pain of their loss; they mourned their loss.**

As they made their journey and were joined by a stranger, a fellow traveler on the road, they began to speak freely about the events that ended Jesus' life, about what that meant for them.

A couple weeks ago, Veta Campbell, wife of the President of the Claremont School of Theology, died unexpectedly. My predecessor Mary Ellen Kilsby was a good friend of the Campbells. She sent President Campbell a card and has given me permission to share what she wrote this morning. Mary Ellen is in Portland today and will be gone for the next several Sundays, preaching on some of them and at family gatherings on others.

Mary Ellen told me that when her husband Bud died, she got many cards saying, "You are in my thoughts and prayers." How many times have I used that phrase? But she said those words became trite and hollow after a while; she yearned for people to acknowledge the depth of her loss, to talk about what Bud's loss meant to them. So Mary Ellen sent President Campbell a card with just two words, "It sucks." Mourning the loss.

Let me share more of Father Nouwen's words:

We must mourn our losses. We cannot talk or act them away, but we can shed tears over them and allow ourselves to grieve deeply. To grieve is to allow our losses to tear apart feelings of security and safety and lead us to the painful truth of our brokenness.

But he also said,

Then the pain of our crying hearts connects us with the moaning and groaning of a suffering humanity. Our mourning becomes larger than ourselves. And in the midst of all this pain, there is a strange, shocking, surprising voice – the voice of one who says, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." That's the unexpected news: there is a blessing hidden in our grief. Not those who comfort are blessed, but those who mourn! Somehow, amidst our tears, a gift is hidden. Somehow, amidst our mourning, the first steps of the dance take place. Somehow, the cries that well up from our losses belong to our songs of gratitude.

Gratitude – maybe that's the second learning from the Emmaus story. First, we must be willing to openly and honestly grieve. **Secondly, we must deliberately choose gratitude over resentment.** More words from Father Nouwen:

The question is whether our losses lead to resentment or to gratitude. Resentment is a real option. Many choose it. When we are hit by one loss after another, it is easy to become disillusioned, angry, bitter and increasingly resentful ... [But] resentment is one of the most destructive forces in our lives. It is cold anger that has settled into the center of our being and hardened our hearts. Resentment can become a way of life that so pervades our words and actions that we no longer recognize it as such.

Now I think we all struggle with containing our resentment. But when I read the biblical story of the disciples walking to Emmaus, I am amazed how little resentment is there. It would have been easy to condemn the forces that led to Jesus' death. But it seems the disciples simply shared their grief with the stranger.

What Nouwen says is:

It is possible to choose, not resentment, but gratitude. Mourning our losses is the first step away from resentment and toward gratitude. The tears of our grief can soften our hardened hearts and open us to the possibility to say "thanks." ... Through mourning our losses we come to know life as a gift. The beauty and preciousness of life is intimately linked with its fragility and mortality. We experience that every day – when we take a flower in our hands, when we see a butterfly dance in the air, when we caress a little baby. Fragility and giftedness are both there, and joy is connected with both.

Then the final learning from the Emmaus story. The two disciples reached a stopping point and invited – actually they insisted – that the stranger stay and break bread with them. They knew the importance of community.

Mourning our losses needs to take place in the context of community. Those losses can be overwhelming if we hold onto them and try to deal with our grief all alone. We need others!

Cynthia Holt told me this week that in 1981, dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille and her neurologist wrote a book entitled *Reprieve* about her life journey after having suffered a stroke. One line in that book has taken on new importance to Cynthia: "Shared suffering, shared fear make a stronger bond than blood – pain cracks us wide open and is totally revealing, and this is when we learn whom we really love and this is what we never forget." Shared suffering and fear – community.

The biblical Book of Acts chronicles the beginning of the church in Jerusalem. In those stories, Jesus' disciples, undoubtedly including the two who had been walking to Emmaus, return to Jerusalem less than two months after Jesus' execution. They knew they needed to gather together again. And the stories say that soon over a hundred followers had arrived, in spite of the danger, in spite of their profound grief at the loss of one they had loved. They returned to revive the community. That group would give birth to the church in Jerusalem, and it in turn to other faith communities.

They knew they could only mourn the loss of their teacher within community itself. Psychiatrist Scott Peck says, "There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community with-

out vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community.”

Throughout our lives, there will be times each of us must deal with loss. The Emmaus story teaches us to grieve openly, to be honest with ourselves about the pain of that loss. It teaches us to deliberately choose gratitude over resentment. And it teaches us that mourning our losses needs to take place in the context of community.

One of my heroes, Pope John XXIII, said: “Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do.”

As we mourn our losses, whatever they may be, may we focus on what is still possible for us to do. Amen.