

Lord, Mercy Us
St. Paul's UCC, Madrid, Iowa
June 12, 2022 Joan Fumetti

Romans 8: 22-27, 35, 37-39 We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A friend called Monday evening. After catching up on this and that, our conversation turned to the heartbreaking epidemic of gun violence that is rocking our nation. She is an African American woman; her emotion was raw as she spoke of the racially motivated massacre of ordinary people simply doing their grocery shopping. People who would never return home to their children and spouses. People who would no longer live into the beauty of the gift of life they had been given. My friend has been working in the office of one of our metro area schools and is a mother of school age children herself. The slaughter of little children and their teachers simply going to school is personal for her. She is soul searching for what is hers to do in response. I've been pondering that question since then. Certainly, we are all called to do *something*, we are all called to ask 'what is mine to do?' And certainly, there are a variety of vital responses, from protests to legislative action, from addressing root causes to compassionate care for those who are most impacted.

And then Tuesday morning this came in the daily email from the Church of the Savior. It is from the diaries of Etty Hillesum, the Dutch woman who was murdered in 1943 at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. From Auschwitz she wrote:

“And you must be able to bear your sorrow; even if it seems to crush you, you will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself; you mustn’t run away from it but bear it like an adult. Do not relieve your feelings of hatred, do not seek to be avenged...Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge—from which new sorrows will be born for others—then sorrow will never cease in this world. And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God.” (Etty Hillesum, “Saturday morning, ten o’clock:”, in *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork*, p. 96)

I sent this to a friend who receives these same emails. She replied: Yes, I’ve been studying this all morning. I was thinking, yes, we can bear this grief and I think we are asked to do that instead of finding a way out of that feeling.

And so, what I want to share this morning is my sense that it is the church’s part to lead us in lament. In giving our sorrow all the space and shelter that is its due, bearing grief honestly and courageously. Inviting the Spirit into our midst to intercede for us with groans too deep for words.

This is something we should be good at for it fills our scripture and our history. And yet we live in a culture that is not at all good at grieving. An unspoken belief that we are entitled to live without suffering leads to a knee jerk reaction to turn *immediately* to anger or blame or demanding solutions so that terrible things stop happening...without *first* pausing to let our hearts be broken open so that holy love can fill them and holy tears can flow. For it is in the fertile tenderness of broken open hearts where deep healing can take root, in our own lives and in the common life we share. It is with eyes washed clear by holy tears that we can glimpse the love and wonder and grace in which we live and move and have our being. Without such hearts, without such tears, our collective sorrow grows, festers really, and disfigures the holy image in which we were created.

In *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* Francis Weller writes that “Our cultural refusal to acknowledge grief and death has twisted us into a culture riddled with death. One of [psychologist Carl] Jung’s more chilling observations was that whatever we put into the shadow doesn’t sit there passively waiting to be reclaimed and redeemed; it regresses and becomes more primitive. Consequently,” Weller writes, “death rattles through our streets daily, in school shootings, suicides, murders, overdoses, gang violence, or through the sanctioned sacrifice of war dead.” And indeed in the rapacious ecological destruction that threatens the death even of our common home.

Weller tells us, “*Bringing grief and death out of the shadow is our spiritual responsibility, our sacred duty.* By do doing, we may be able to feel our desire for life once again and remember who we are, where we belong, and what is sacred.”

Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue writes that “What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach...When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us.”

I learned much about such an approach in navigating grief’s deep waters when my husband died unexpectedly a year and a half ago. There were plenty of times I just wanted to push through. I had so much to do in the face of losing a partner whose skill and strength I lacked in dealing with a big old house and yard and garden and our little flock of chickens. I would find myself feeling tired or cranky or listless and wonder why. Then I would remember that sorrow has many faces. I would stop and say, “Welcome, grief,” giving it the space and shelter that is its due. Waves of grief would crash over me, but I found that I needn’t fear them for I was held by an unseen benevolence; grief would not swallow me, and if I approached reverently, grief would be my teacher.

And teach me it did...about the way weeping and wailing clear the way for the peace that passes understanding and for joy to surprise us. I learned again that reality is ever changing and there is wisdom in holding all things lightly. I was schooled in the power of gratitude to create abundance when we are tempted to stay too long with emptiness and lack. And slowly, day by day, I learned that there are countless ways in which to live a beautiful life.

Most of all I learned that I was not alone. Friends and family and neighbors showed up, had my back. And when I sat in an empty house at the end of the day I found that even then I wasn’t alone. I came to know a holy, unseen Presence that permeated everything, enveloping me in a love so real it was almost palpable. I have come to see in that loving Presence the Mercy of

God, flowing through me and the circumstances of my life, transforming me and my life even when outwardly all appears the same.

Our word 'mercy' comes from the same root as 'commerce'. At its root, mercy is about exchange, God's inner most being turned outward to sustain the visible and created world in unbreakable love. Cynthia Bourgeault describes mercy as warm heartedness, a fierce bonding love, compassion, forgiveness, a vast gentle wideness, a wholeness of love from which nothing can ever be lost. Mercy is the great weaver, collecting and binding the scattered and broken parts of our lives in a tapestry of Divine Love. Knowing ourselves held in mercy, grief can be welcomed and given a place at the table. Stepping into the Divine Exchange of mercy, our lives flow. Mercy carries us and keeps us afloat; we won't drown.

After the start of the war in Ukraine my spiritual practice group began praying for the people of Ukraine, and Russia as well, praying 'Lord, have mercy' in Russian, *Gospodi Pomiluj*,

One woman shared that her family were WWII refugees from Russia, so Russian is her first language. She grew up in a Russian Baptist church surrounded by people who had all been displaced by the war; this community was everyone's family. Over and over they would tell the stories of how their lives had been torn apart by war and how they had ended up in America. Watching the videos and pictures from Ukraine, she said, was like watching their stories played out on the screen, and knowing the personal catastrophic effects this has on people was deeply crushing.

She was stunned to realize that the Russian phrase "господи помилуй" is translated "Lord have mercy" in English. "Mercy" is a verb in Russian which changes the meaning so greatly she hadn't realized it was the same phrase. It would be more like us saying, "Lord, mercy us."

She told us that when she had heard this prayer in the context of the stories told by her refugee community, their plea was for Presence, not a change in circumstance. That sense of Presence changes everything, even if outwardly all appears the same. Paul wants us to know with certainty that nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from this Presence and the love that pours out to us.

Lord, mercy us. I've been using that phrase in my own prayers and it feels like a tender way to pray for our dear, broken world. A prayer that doesn't build a wall against grief, shutting us off

from our own humanity, but trusts that somehow honest grief draws us closer to one another and to the benevolence ever offering us undreamt of assistance.

Charles Eisenstein has written a book with a title that packages a lot of wisdom in a few words. The book is called 'The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible'. We grieve because our hearts know that the inhumanity rocking our world today from Mariupol to Buffalo to Uvalde is a ghastly disfiguration of the image in which we were created. Our hearts know something else is possible.

What if grieving is the doorway to get there? What if Francis Weller is right? What if it is doing the holy work of grief cleanly and reverently that will free us from the epidemic of violence and despair that seem to hold us captive? From Auschwitz Etty Hillisum tells us that if we bear grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate....She writes, "If you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God."

Our faith grounds us in the hope of which Paul writes in today's scripture. Hope for something we do not yet see. The groans that we share with creation come not from despair but from the pain of giving birth to the new creation the Holy One is calling forth. May we have the courage to let this be born among us.

Lord, mercy us. Amen