

Church: Keeping Company with the Fallen

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1 Corinthians 12: 12-13; 26-27

In his novel, *Chesapeake*, James Michener writes movingly about a gander, Onk-or, whose mate has been shot out of the sky by hunters. He finds her crippled and fluttering ineffectually in the rushes, just as a large dog picks up her scent. Onk-or fusses at his wounded mate and pushes her into a deeper marsh. The dog finds them, but the male goose turns and savagely attacks the dog with his beak and thrashing wings. The dog retreats and Onk-or then pushes his crippled mate further into hiding. They remain in hiding for a week. He protects her and brings her food until her wing heals and they take off once again for what Michener calls, “the frozen moorlands of Canada.”

And this is not an isolated story of a novelist. Des and Jen Bartlett, noted nature photographers, lived with migrating snow geese for a year. They reported seeing entire flocks of geese halting their migration to stay with an injured companion who faced certain death from the coming winter. They remained with the fallen one long into the edge of the winter that was pursuing them, only leaving the injured one behind when their own survival as a flock was threatened. Once again, our fellow creatures in nature show us the way to go.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” Keeping company with the fallen – it’s what we are called to do. I recall the story of a child who was late in returning home from an errand. She explained to her worried parents that she had come across a friend who had dropped her beloved china doll and watched it smashed to pieces on the sidewalk. “Oh,” her father said, “so you stopped to help her pick up the pieces.” “No,” the child responded, “I stopped to help her cry.” And a little child shall lead them. “When one suffers, all suffer together.” Sometimes, rather than providing answers or solutions, what matters most is simply taking the time to help each other cry, taking the time to let another know that we care and that we are willing to walk with them.

As I work my way through the gospels, I am always struck by the particularity of Jesus’ ministry and message. He didn’t really speak much about great cosmic issues. No, what we see in Jesus, time and time again, is his reaching out to and helping and nurturing and caring and healing, one person at a time. Consider our text for today. The leader of the local synagogue, Jairus, a man of some power and influence, comes to Jesus and pleads with him to come to his home and heal his daughter who is ill to the point of death. Jesus agrees to go.

But as they make their way to Jairus’ home, a woman comes out of the crowd and touches Jesus’ cloak, hoping this desperate act might heal her. Quite a bold thing, a risky thing, for her to do – reach out and touch a man’s clothing in public...something women simply did not do, were not allowed to do. And indeed she is healed. But Jesus stops. He knows someone has touched him and he wants to know who it is. The reaction of the disciples is quite different: “Jesus, there must be a hundred people here. Who cares who touched you? It doesn’t matter. Let’s get going. Jairus is an important man and we need to get to his house. Don’t worry about the crowd and who touched you.” But Jesus won’t let it go; he wants to know who touched him.

So she comes out of the crowd – fearful, trembling. She knows the risk she has taken and is now prepared to reap the consequences of such a bold, inappropriate action. But what does he say? He says what no one in that crowd expected him to say. He doesn’t berate her, criticize her...which is what he should have done. He says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

One nameless woman in a crowd who interrupts him in the midst of an important mission. But he stops, he notices, he heals. In that moment nothing else matters but her. Right here we see the radical particularity of the gospel. Jesus is one who keeps company with the fallen, no matter when or where, one at a time. How can we do any less?

I think of the old story of a young man who was unceremoniously “dumped” by his girlfriend. “Who is there to love me now?” he moaned, “Who will hold my hand?” To which his friend responded, “That’s all right. Don’t worry about it. God loves you and you can sit on your hands.” But that is a pretty forlorn and cold exercise. There is a crucial break in the conduit somewhere. As Jesus demonstrated over and over, God may indeed love us, but how will we ever know for sure unless some other human person holds our hand tenderly, forgivingly,

generously, unless someone takes the time and has the compassion to help us up when we fall, yes, even to sit and cry with us? “When one suffers, all suffer together.”

The word, “kindness”, comes to mind, but kindness as far more than a single or random action. What is demanded in our angry and fearful time, and what Jesus demonstrates, is far more than simply random acts of kindness. In the words of ethics professor, Christine D. Pohl, “Kindness is part of a way of life characterized by moral attentiveness that is both respectful of – and helpful to – others. Kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person’s well-being and to treat him or her as deserving of generous response and respect...Kindness as a posture of life and a practice of the people of God offers a glimpse into the new creation. In the midst of all our words, conduct, debates and decisions, imagine what a surprise it would be if people first noticed our kindness.” Hearts can be touched; hearts can be changed.

A pastor shares this story: “My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn’t go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, ‘I know what the church wants. Church doesn’t care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge; just another name, another pledge. Right?’ That’s what he always said. I recall my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, fearful of flaring tempers. ‘The church doesn’t care about me. Just another name, another pledge.’ I guess I heard my father say that a thousand times.

But one time he didn’t say it. He was in the veteran’s hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They’d taken out his throat and said, ‘It’s too late.’ They put in a metal tube. I flew in to see him. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t eat. I looked around his room. There were potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And all the flowers, all the cards, every blossom, were from individuals or groups in the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written the line, I would not be telling you this story. He wrote: “In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.”

I said, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And he wrote, ‘I was wrong.’”

An act of caring, a word of kindness, keeping company with the fallen...and there it is...a new creation – a changed heart.

Many of you have heard the last words of German philosopher, Goethe: “Light, light, let there be more light.” Reflecting on those words, the Spanish philosopher, Unamuno, said this: “It is not more light we need, but more warmth. Warmth, warmth, more warmth. We die of cold, not of darkness. It’s not the night that kills, but the frost.” We can be agents of, providers of, that warmth.

Of course, every worship service is different, hopefully every Sunday sermon is different, even though it has been suggested that many ministers only have five sermons that they preach 55 different ways. But hopefully, each Sunday here, there can be a moment when we do keep company with the fallen: the unknown person who comes into worship ready to crack under a load of grief or guilt or fear; the stranger who came late, slipped into the back pew, then left early; the person racked by illness and pain; the one struggling with anger, the one who this past week seriously considered suicide. Was there a moment in worship when Jesus wept with them, touched them, helped them begin the process of picking up the pieces of their lives? Did the worship service have any moments of release or encouragement or support for the many worshipers who come baffled and dazed by what life is doing to them? I – we - need to keep asking these questions – how do we faithfully keep company with the fallen?

We are back to the geese. They come in for healing and rest and sustenance – as a Christian may go to church. But they don’t stay. They also have a definite take-off ritual. They encourage each other, offer a kind of preflight support system. One naturalist writes that geese “talk one another into the necessary state of arousal.” (now there’s a phrase that would catch people’s interest in a church brochure!) Geese actually to indicate their intention to one another. Experienced observers can tell whether geese intend a short flight or a long one by their actions prior to take-off.

Well, perhaps that should be the exhilarating sense of every Sunday worship service – the weekly “taking-off” ritual of the Christian church! In the words of one of my mentors, Browne Barr, “When the church is truly airborne, it lifts with it into the merciful, redeeming, caring presence of God the whole fallen world, including itself, which God so loved that he sent his only Son to bring it home again.”