

Grieving and Hoping

Ephesians 1:15-23

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
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I.

Sometimes I think we forget how strange this thing is, this thing called “church.” Making a regular practice of coming together the way we do is really, very odd if you think about it.

A group of people of a variety of ages and backgrounds, more and less familiar with each other, gathers weekly to sing songs,

to pray prayers,

to confess failures and receive a graceful assurance,

to practice peace-making by greeting neighbors and strangers,

to hear the reading of ancient texts,

to engage with a sermon, of all things,

to make an offering of money that they could otherwise keep,

to eat a bit of bread and a sip of juice and call it a feast,

to offer and receive blessing,

and then to part from this place, and this time, resolved to live a different kind of life,

a life centered on “God,” that most mismanaged, maligned, and manhandled of words,

but not just any ol’ god, God who is embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus whom we Christians call the Christ.

These are strange things that we do.

Even if this is what you’ve been doing with your Sunday mornings for a long, long while, it’s good to remember now and again that this really is a peculiar way of life.

And this peculiar way of life can be a good way to live.

I often think that people outside the church, and inside of it, tend to pay more attention to the things the church does wrong than the things it does right.

Afterall, if you’re looking for things the Christian Church has done wrong, you won’t have to look far.

I’m talking about institutional wrongs and interpersonal wrongs, wrongs like fear-mongering and scapegoating and bigotry and chauvinism and violence.

If the church is supposed to be the place that rises above all of these human tendencies, then the church falls very short indeed.

But what about when the church happens to do the right thing?

The right thing sometimes happens institutionally and sometimes interpersonally. Imagine what it felt like at the first concert of the first Gay Men's Chorus in the country to have been founded in and by a church.

Did I mention it happened in Colorado Springs, of all places, over 10 years ago? Or imagine a woman feeling tired and a bit sick, who probably should have been in bed, coming down to the church to help find a shelter bed for another woman who smelled of alcohol and cigarettes and who was living on the street. What makes somebody do that?

It is an odd life to which the church is called. Not a life of perfection, but a life that is honest about what is wrong and yet seeks to do that which is right, a life that sees and names what is ill, or even evil, and then seeks to be the hands and feet that bring healing.

II.

On this All Saints Sunday, I am thinking about something the church does that it sometimes does so well and that it sometimes does so poorly.

And that something is "Grieving."

Grieving is not something that comes naturally to most Americans.

It think is because America tends to be a nation of doers, which has helped Americans accomplish a lot.

Even here in the sleepy hamlet of Sebastopol we find a town of doers.

Those of us in our school years or childrearing years or career building years are constantly doing – driving, shopping, selling, studying, volunteering, fulfilling, and maintaining.

While we may think of retiring as the opportunity to slow down, I have observed that retirees can have a hard time shifting from doing to being because in our culture value is placed on what you accomplish less than it is on who you are.

While the word "grieving" is in the form of an active verb, grief is more something that happens to us than it is something we do.

It is similar to healing in this sense.

When you fall and hurt yourself, there are things you can do not to make it any worse, but mainly you have to let the healing happen.

Grief is like that.

It's like the difference between hacking through a jungle to get to your destination verses floating down a river.

Grieving is like floating down a river and letting the landscape come to you.

Your work is in the observing.

The only thing you know about the destination is that it is downstream, always downstream.

And if we're really honest, while we may arrive at destinations along the way, one blink and we're suddenly in the flow of the river again being carried further along in grief.

Perhaps you've been at a Memorial Service and your grief surprises you and you realize you are not only grieving the person for whom the Memorial Service is being held, but you are grieving someone who died a year ago or 10 years ago or 50 years ago.

It's as if all of our various griefs flow out of the same deep mountain lake, and to tap into one is to tap into them all.

I think the church does grieving well, and models grieving for the wider society, when it does not try to fix or cajole or even explain, but when it simply creates the time and space for grief to flow.

This doesn't mean the church doesn't have a word of hope for grieving people.

It does! It has the best word, the good news that death does not have the final word and the final word is a word of Life, with a capital "L," which the church calls Life in God or New Life in Christ.

But we have to be careful with that good word lest it be used as it shouldn't be used, as a Band Aid to the very real grieving that happens to people.

I'm guessing many of you have been to a Memorial Service at which the deceased person is made into a saint.

It's like an unwritten rule that nothing negative can be said of the person even though the harm the person both caused and experienced is the hidden elephant sitting in the middle of the sanctuary.

It's as if we believe that if we remember the person positively enough our memory of how great they are will replace our memory of what a jerk they could be.

So the church does grieving well when it avoids the temptation of trying to make it all okay.

In essence, the church is at its best when it is engaged dialogically with the God of all creation, made known to us in the person of Christ Jesus.

In dialogue with God, the church is at its best when it says, "It is not all okay. This death thing is not okay. Simply getting over it is not an option. There is a deep hole in my heart."

And yet, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

III.

The good news spoken in response to overwhelming grief is rearticulated in the New Testament work known as Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

One reason why many scholars think that Paul himself likely did not write it is because Paul spent most of the latter years of his ministry at the church in Ephesus.

You write letters to distant communities, not the one you live in.

The opening chapter of Ephesians is one of the appointed lectionary texts for All Saints Day.

It begins with Paul oozing love all over the church people in Ephesus, complimenting their faithfulness and their love, saying "I find myself thanking God for you all the time." And then he prays over them, asking God to give them wisdom and revelation and enlightenment, all the good stuff, so that they might have hope, hope in God's power, and hope in the good news that God's greatest act of power came in raising Jesus from the dead and giving him authority over the whole universe.

It's some pretty big stuff he's saying here, some odd, strange, peculiar stuff.

It's like a double or triple dose of Gospel medicine.

But then he says something that will really rattle you if you can hear it.

I know it rattles me.

"God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made Christ the head over all things... wait for it... for the church, the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

Did you hear it?

The church – little ol' you and me – we are the Body of Christ, the fullness of the one who fills all in all.

Talk about a high calling.

The Church in Ephesus and the Church in Sebastopol embody Christ in the world.

The church in general, and particular churches like ours, are the imperfect vessels that convey the fullness of the one who fills all in all in all.

IV.

That can't be.

If anything, that's the work of saints, and we all know that the saints are few and far between.

Even the saints, we often learn after the fact, are filled with floundering flaws.

Which is why it's important to remember that when the word "saints" is used in the New Testament, it almost always means simply "church people."

The saints are the ones we remember today, especially those who embodied steadfast faithfulness, love, generosity, and compassion.

But "saints" also means the person sitting next to you right now.

And believe me, the person sitting next to you is no saint, in the conventional sense.

But in the deeper sense intended in the Book of Acts and Paul's Letter to the Romans, and the Letter to the Ephesians, in that deeper and truer sense, the person sitting next to you, here in church, doing this strange work of holding a place where people can be real and where God can be both harangued and praised, that person is most certainly a saint, in Greek, a *hagioi*, "a holy one."

Together as the Body of Christ, when we come together like this we are allowing ourselves to be taken, blessed, broken, and given back to a hurting world as an expression of hope.

We leave this place not paragons of piety nor pillars of perfection,
Not exemplars of excellence nor enlightened elites,
Not marvelous Messiahs nor crystalline Christs.

There's a big difference between *being* Christ, which we are not, and being Christ's body, which we most certainly are.

It means we bear his wounds and his grief and his ministry of healing and compassion in our own flesh and bones.

It means that wherever we are and wherever we go Christ is intending to continue his ministry in and through us.

It's an odd way to be in the world. It's a strange way to live. It's a peculiar existence.

It's the existence of saints,

saints who grieve,

saints for whom we grieve,

saints who remember,

saints who forget.

saints who rejoice,

saints who hope,

saints who mysteriously, miraculously, imperfectly embody the fullness of the one who fills all in all.

Amen.