

LEARNING FROM LOSS

II Samuel 12:15-23, Proverbs 3:11-12

August 14th, 2008

Sometimes I love open worship and sometimes I despise it. This past Sunday was the latter. A group of us were sitting in worship at Fairfield Meeting. Phil had greeted us at the door. People had been warm and welcoming. The sermon had been funny and insightful. It had been a pleasant morning.

Then a woman stood in open worship and began to talk about a man in their congregation who'd recently died. Even though Phil had already spent time speaking about the man and addressing words of comfort to his family, this woman apparently wanted to give meaning to the loss. She talked about what a wonderful singer the man had been and then said, "God must have needed another tenor in the heavenly choir."

I wanted throw up. Partially because Gail and Jessica Hoffman were sitting there, partially because it was so trite. Mostly because I'd spent the week thinking about all the inane explanations people give for suffering and loss. I was tempted to stand after the woman sat down and say, "I wish God wasn't so needy." But that wouldn't have been very gracious.

This evening, I want to talk about the lessons we learn from loss. And the first thing you learn in the midst of loss is how desperate people are to give meaning to it.

The woman's comment about God needing another tenor in the heavenly choir reminds me of many of the awful remarks I've heard from people at funeral homes. Indeed, sometimes I wish there was a sign at the door of every funeral home that read, "Tell us your favorite memory. Tell us you miss them. Then be quiet." Instead, too many people try to give meaning to tragedy.

They say things like "God must have needed another angel." Or "they're no longer in pain." Well intentioned people say, "They're in a better place" or "it's all in God's plan," or my least favorite, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." I used to think these statements were offered as words of comfort, but I'm not so certain. I've begun to wonder if they are really attempts to distance ourselves from the randomness and painfulness of loss. If we can pretend the loss isn't a loss, then we can ignore the pain. If we can figure out its meaning, maybe we can avoid it.

The problem with most of what we offer as words of comfort is that they aren't all that comforting. Much of it isn't true or is highly speculative. For instance, when people suggest God needed another angel I always want to ask where

they got the idea that people become angels. That isn't in the Bible. People are people and angels are angels.

And why would God need angels or tenors or whatever? Why do we think God is so needy? If God is all powerful, what could God possibly need? If you're going to involve God in someone's loss, you at least ought to know your Bible and understand some basic theology.

Too often, our remarks in the midst of loss make it sound as if we're God. "They're no longer in pain" may be true, but it's highly speculative. None of us really know what happens after death. I'd like to believe there will be no tears or sorrow, but if being separated from the ones we love is painful for the living, it may be painful for the dead. I hope they miss us too. According to the Bible, when Lazarus died, Jesus didn't say, "Lucky guy." He wept.

Suggesting someone is in a better place is troubling for several reasons. First, as I mentioned last week, it only makes sense if you think earth a miserable place. Right now, I'm not all that interested in heaven. I really like earth. If there's a better place, I can wait. Especially since many Christians think I'm a heretic and I'm not going to a better place.

If you believe in heaven and hell, it's kind of presumptuous to suggest you know someone's final destiny. Maybe they aren't in a better place. If you're right about hell, lots of people are in a worse place, but you never hear anyone ever say at a funeral, "At least they're in a worse place."

Finally, saying "they're in a better place" to someone grieving is a little cruel. It implies that their love was inadequate, that what they had to offer was insufficient. It suggests they should be happy instead of sad. That may be easy to accept when someone dies at the age of 90. It doesn't work very well when you're mourning a child or the death of a young mother. Even if they are in a better place, that doesn't diminish our loss.

As bad as some of these words of comfort can be, I'm even more concerned when we credit God with the loss. "It's all in God's plan" may be one of the ugliest things people can say in the midst of loss. If God planned for my mother to die and leave behind five children, two of whom were still at home, I think it was a lousy plan. Such a God is either cruel or incompetent, hardly worth worshipping. And don't tell me the "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." If the Lord is so capricious, the Lord can't be trusted. If you say that to me when I'm grieving, you're one I'll want the Lord to take away.

I understand the need for an all powerful God who has the whole world in his hands. I sang the song for years, but it doesn't work for me anymore. If God has everything in his hands, those are bloody hands. I'd much rather have a

less powerful God who grieves with me than an all powerful one who takes from me.

I wish people would think about the full ramifications of what they say to people experiencing loss. It isn't only in death that people say unhelpful words. We want to give meaning to every loss; the break-up of a marriage, the loss of a job, bad health, or accidents. We offer such platitudes as "The Lord never gives you more than you can handle" and ignore the approximately 15 million people globally who commit suicide each year. We say, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger" even though we know how great tragedies can break strong people. And then there is that gag producing, "When God closes a door, God opens a window." In the midst of loss, that window better not be on the second floor. Some of us might be tempted to jump.

Christianity even tries to make suffering into a gift with verses like "Those God loves, God chastens." Indeed, when I googled "suffering" on the internet, the first site was one called "Eight Biblical Explanations For Suffering" which argued that God often uses suffering to teach us or others. Sometimes your loss is an object lesson.

Recently, I was listening to Christian radio when a man suggested God had struck him blind so he could appreciate the plight of the handicapped. Though I believe we do learn much from loss, what would we think of a human parent who tried to excuse blinding their child with such arguments.

Of course, even more sinister is the suggestion that our loss is a punishment for our behavior. Jerry Falwell exposed such thinking when he suggested 9/11 was a divine punishment for America's tolerance of homosexuality. Though he later retracted his remarks, I suspect he still believed them. Many Christians like a wrathful God, especially when God is smiting others. Though no one ever comes to a funeral home or sits with a depressed person and says, "What did you do wrong?," many of us ask ourselves that question in the midst of loss. Raised on stories of divine punishment, we worry.

The story we heard this morning is one of many in the Bible that reinforce such thinking. In the story, King David has been exposed as an adulterer and murderer by the prophet Nathan. He's admitted his guilt and sought God's forgiveness. Nathan assured him that "the Lord has taken away your sin," which sounds wonderfully gracious unless you read the rest of the chapter.

This story is not one of grace. Forgiveness comes at a terrible price. The Bible says, "The Lord struck down the child of David and Bathsheba and he become ill." (verse 15) And though David fasted and prayed for seven days, the child died. The Lord gave and the Lord took away.

This is one of those stories that, if the Bible must be taken literally, makes atheism attractive to me. If God's wrath is the only explanation for the child's death, I want nothing to do with this God. But I think there may be another explanation; one that doesn't make God into a murderer. I think all humans, including King David, insist on giving meaning to our losses.

Think about King David. He's done a terrible thing. The guilt of it has eaten away at him. His sin is exposed. His child dies. Is it any wonder that King David connects these two emotional events? Don't we all fall into that trap? When great losses come, we review our lives and look for some explanation for what has happened. What did we do wrong? Like King David, we can't accept the possibility that sometimes babies die, even to people who aren't adulterers and murderers.

This randomness in suffering is what we most hate. And yet this is one of the important lessons of loss. Loss happens to all of us. None of us are immune. Sometimes we can see its meaning. Often we cannot. Sometimes it is our fault. Often it is not.

Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search For Meaning*, struggles with this life lesson. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived a Nazi concentration camp. In the years after his liberation, he tried to understand why he survived and so many others didn't. He was uncomfortable with the conclusion that he was lucky.

One of his observations was that those who lost hope, soon died. He wrote, "It is not suffering that destroys people, but suffering without meaning." He concluded that those who found meaning in the midst of suffering were more likely to survive.

I think Frankl is partially correct. I do think finding meaning in great loss is important. What I'd dispute is that the meaning of a loss is hidden within that loss, that the lesson is there if we dig deep enough. When it comes to loss, sometimes when you finish digging all you have left is a hole. Unless you believe Hitler's argument that the human race needed to be cleansed from Jewish blood, the Holocaust is a meaningless tragedy.

What I think Frankl realized was in the midst of that great tragedy it was still possible to create meaning. Even when our losses are random and meaningless, we still have this option of making them meaningful.

I saw this clearly when Amber died. Initially, her death was meaningless. It was an accident, completely random. None of the platitudes worked. God did not need angel in heaven. It was not God's plan. It was not a punishment.

There was no silver lining. When I arrived at the hospital, I said little because there was so little to say.

But Amber's death did not remain meaningless. When Gail and the girls decided to make her an organ donor, her death became meaningful. It became an opportunity for others to live, to thrive.

This is the ultimate lesson of loss. In the midst of loss, we are asked to make a choice. Will we pretend our loss isn't a loss? Will we blame God or ourselves? Will we act as if it all makes sense? Or will we take on the horrible and wonderful human responsibility of shaking our fist at the heavens and saying, "I will not allow this loss to rob me of the joys of living!" We learn the least from our losses when we accept the platitudes. Only when we refuse to be easily comforted, do we find the courage to give meaning to our lives.

Victor Frankl said, "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

In the midst of loss, the final lesson is to stop asking why.

That question often has no answer.

The more important question is "what now?"