

“Unraveled: Public Grief that Inspires Action”

2 Samuel 21:1-14

Many of us grew up hearing the saying, “Don’t get mad, you get even!” Yet, we also know about the futility of getting even. When you think of the 19th century Hatfield-McCoy feud, you know of the futility of revenge. In fact, revenge killings go back centuries and cross many cultures. It seems that as humans we believe the illusion that hurting someone else would make us feel better or would bring us redemption and justice. Whether we do this personally or communally, revenge seems to be one of our most challenging temptations. But in reality, revenge does not really make us feel better (at least not for long!) In fact, instead of finding peace, we end up adding to the pain and suffering of all involved. We confuse justice with the instinct for revenge. The illusion of revenge is based on another illusion: That we are separate from each other. When life unravels, one of the responses to pain is to lash out at others, but today’s Bible story offers us a different path, an alternative to violence and to the instinct to inflict pain on others.

Revenge is at the heart of our story from 2 Samuel 21. Somebody had to be blamed for the nation’s misfortune. There was a three-year famine in the land and King David discerned in his prayers that it was related to the violent actions of King Saul against the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were supposed to be protected according to a peace treaty with Joshua (Joshua 9). So when Saul broke the treaty, David believed that the famine in the land was a punishment from God. He went out and asked the Gibeonites what they wanted to help remedy the situation. They could have asked for anything they wanted, but what they asked for was revenge. Someone had to die! They asked for seven descendants of Saul to be killed. King David obliged and he allowed them to kill 7 of Saul’s sons, two of whom were the sons of Rizpah, who was a secondary wife of Saul. She went up to the hill where her sons were killed and stayed with them publicly grieving for six months.

Rizpah was not going to let this injustice go unnoticed, but she was not going to seek revenge. Her public grief exposed the injustice of the king and moved him to act justly to not allow the desecration of the bodies of these young men. The king was wrong to think that God required human sacrifice and that violence and revenge could ever be redemptive! The woman’s public display of grief brought the king back to his senses and brought some healing to an ugly situation. Even though it did not bring back her own children, I am sure it prevented future kings from telling the people that human sacrifice would be needed. The power of public grief brought healing and wholeness to a whole people.

I can’t help but think of the mother of Emmett Till who put his body on display for the world to see the injustice that was committed against him. On a hot summer night in 1955 in Mississippi, Emmett was violently murdered by two white men after being falsely accused of offending a white woman. Emmett’s mother refused to have him buried quietly. She wanted the world to see what was done to her son. She wanted to mourn the injustice publicly so that other mothers would not have to go through what she went through. And indeed, the display of the disfigured body of her son before the entire world moved so many people with compassion and ushered in the Civil Rights Movement.

Public grief is about inviting others to enter into the pain and suffering of others. It is not about revenge, violence, or anger.

Public grief is difficult for most of us. We struggle with showing that much emotion and we struggle with entering someone else's grief. We want to fix someone's pain or exact revenge on wrongdoers. But grief is a different way for dealing with pain. It is about compassion and empathy. It is about being vulnerable with each other and sharing where we are hurt. It is much easier to lash out at others than to let them into our deep pain. Revenge seems like a good solution, but it always leaves us empty and even more broken. When we allow public grief, we enter into the depth of our human experiences and learn to see each other with compassion instead of judgment and fear.

In this time of pandemic and racial pain, we do well to learn from the example of Rizpah and her public grief. If we allow ourselves and others to enter into the depth of the pain of the losses we are experiencing, we can learn to see each other with greater compassion. Our focus would shift from blame and revenge to healing and care. Grief has a way of moving us away from empty intellectual arguments and opinions to embrace the truth of our human experience that we are all connected.

Through the years, I have had the privilege of entering into people's pain and grief and in each case, I have found sacred ground there instead of judgment and anger. Our work is to learn to grieve well for ourselves and with others. When we experience personal loss, how do we enter into that space and allow the pain to be present with God in the midst of pain without trying to manage it, numb it, or push it away? When someone is hurt or upset, how do we listen to the grief that is dwelling deep in their souls? What if we dealt with the struggles of Black people in our country by being open to their grief instead of just trying to analyze our way out of the systems of racism?

For the story time for this week I used the book, *Tear Soup*, by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck Deklyen. It is an incredible book because of its powerful wisdom about grief and how we can grieve. The metaphor for grief work in this book is that of making tear soup. The invitation is to put memories, feelings, and thoughts into the soup so that one could honor the loss and enter it more fully. It is an intentional process that takes time, patience, and vulnerability. By making tear soup, one does not get rid of the loss and its pain. Instead we learn to honor it and move into compassionate action for ourselves and for our neighbors. Grief is very personal and often makes a lot of people extremely uncomfortable. Yet, grief can help us bond with others in ways that are not possible in any other way. Most of the people who judge or lash out at others, are often people with unresolved grief. Remember what Richard Rohr says about pain that is not transformed, "it is often transmitted." If we are to heal the racial divisions and pain of our country, we have to grieve together and listen to pain publicly. Just like funerals are important for our grief to be acknowledged, making tear soup provides us the same space for our other losses.

This week, I want to invite us to make tear soup together. We will take a few moments of reflection to imagine and allow God to guide us as to what ingredients we need to put in our tear soup personally and collectively. As we share in our grief, God is in our midst and will bring us the healing we need. The cross of Jesus is all about God entering our experiences of loss and pain to transform and redeem them. Amen.

Resource: http://griefwatch.com/pub/media/wysiwyg/Tear_Soup_Tips.pdf