



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
30 December 2018
Sermon: "Be Thankful"
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

Two weeks ago, in all the hustle and bustle of preparing for Christmas, our church held a small service on a Sunday evening called "The Longest Night." We hold it because, despite all the beauty of the season, our community recognizes that Christmas is also hard for many of us, as we deal with illness, or stress, or loss. This year's service was larger than usual, some 40 people came, because, well, this has been a hard year for many of us. It's a simple service, some music, some readings, some prayers, lighting candles, and communion; the lights are dimmed in the sanctuary throughout. During communion, there are two prayer stations, each in a corner by the aisles. And people can come there, and sit with someone on the pastoral staff. I was one of those people this year, and so, with many of our parishioners, I simply asked, "How can I pray for you?" This was a way of practicing our faith together, praying together, being held in prayer, in worship, together, in the midst of the trials and circumstances and grief that we weather.

It's a good question to ask: What is your prayer for today? How can we pray for you? What would it take for you to feel held in prayer this morning?

In June of this year, a 27 year-old named Alex took his life after years of battling depression. I do not mention his death lightly here, not only because suicide is a difficult topic for Sunday morning, when our community, like any community, has been so touched by loss over the years. But its also not something I bring up lightly because his mother is a seminary professor at Iliff School of Theology named Carrie Doehring; she is someone who has become a friend of mine, as I gotten to know her over the past few years at conferences. For one such conference, in September, three months after her son's death, she wrote a 40-page article about her experiences planning and experiencing Alex's memorial service.¹ She named the paper, "Spiritual Practices that Reveal Embodied Compassion as the Foundation for Searching for Meanings amidst Traumatic Grief." Granted, it's not the catchiest title I've ever read.

But the paper is a poignant exploration of grief still in its most raw form. You can see the author processing her grief through her writing: "On the last night before Alex took his life," Carrie writes, "I watched him, as he sat for a long time looking out at the sun setting on the mountains. His face was calm. He was not

¹ Carrie Doehring, "Searching for Wholeness Amidst Traumatic Grief: The Role of Spiritual Practices that Reveal Compassion in Embodied, Relational, and Transcendent Ways." *Pastoral Psychology*. Springer Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0858-5>

angry. He seemed at peace. He seemed open to the beauty of the world. He told me not to worry. I hear his words now as a blessing – his way of saying good bye. I find solace in this haiku poem he wrote in April:

I went into the dark

Boldly, sweetly, crazy

It held me.”

Carrie says that this exploration of the darkness, this feeling of being held in the midst of the darkness of her son’s death, rather than being overcome by it, that is how she describes her grief, that is what she needs from her grief; it is her grief-work.

Elsewhere in this long article, Carrie records excerpts of her rector’s homily for Alex’s service. This pastor’s words call for trust within grief. She proclaims, that, “There is one who will never forget / that one will remember Alex / Beyond time and forever. / There is one who mends, heals / Restores, and makes new / That one has gathered up the brokenness of Alex / And made him whole.”

I cannot fathom Carrie’s loss, what it took for her to work through her grief while writing that paper, how she held on to the promises of the pastor’s words, how she learned how to be held by the darkness of her grief, rather than be consumed by it.

Psychologists warn us that a common response to traumatic grief is an internal disconnection within the self, a blockage appears between the mind and the body, so when the body signals its deep need to lament: when you have trouble getting out of bed; when you tear up for apparently no reason at all, the mind tends to get all tangled up in an inescapable loop of self-reproach and blame, or the mind buries itself, grasping for distractions in addiction or social media or consumerism. Instead of practicing the self-compassion that grief so often calls for, in times of crisis, we tend to hit ourselves over the head: ‘Why can’t I love more, or why did I not love enough when I had the chance? Why can’t I believe? Why am I not the person in this moment I had hoped I would be?’

So, I ask: How does one feel held, in grief, in the unknown, in the darkness, rather than be overcome?

“Be thankful,” says the writer of Colossians. “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another...forgive each other...clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Today, at the close of 2018, at the promise of a new year, I hear these words as an invitation rather than a command or rebuke. It does not ask, “Why aren’t you thankful enough? Why don’t you love each other enough? Why can’t you forgive?” The passage is not about blame, or shame, though lists describing the

Christian life have been read and abused in such ways. The passage invites us to practice a different way of being, and of doing.

Where are you in this Christmas season, the week after celebrating the birth of Jesus, as the nights grow long? What do you take along with you, as you say good-bye to another year?

- For some, we know, it is loss, as we grieve loved ones, or relationships, or jobs, or roles suddenly or slowly lost.
- For some, we know, it is fear, fear of what might happen next to those most marginalized in this country, in the name of national security, in the name of prosperity; fear of what might happen to us, when we teeter ourselves on the edge of the margins.
- Others yearn for direction, feeling like our past ways are no longer working, feeling God calling us elsewhere.
- And many more simply take with them the feeling of the unknown, the darkness of the yet-to-be, not sure of what will come, and how we will be able to move through it.

What would it take for you to feel held, as Alex's poem says, by the dark, "Boldly, sweetly, crazy." What would it take for you to feel the presence, as the pastor proclaims, of the one "who mends, heals / Restores, and makes new," as you travel from one year to the next?

“Be thankful,” says the writer of Colossians, and these words are more invitation than reproach. They call us to a series of embodied spiritual practices that cultivate thankfulness, love, trust. Love is not a permanent state of being, not a destination that you have to reproach yourself for not already being there. Love, and thankfulness, and compassion are practices. Jesus, as a child, gave his parents quiet the scare when he stayed behind in Jerusalem to talk with the leaders of the temple. But, notice that important transition at the end of our New Testament passage today. When he got home, over time, through the years, “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years.” Jesus – the text tells us – cultivated love; Jesus grew in love, through the practices of faith. He shows us that such growth is not a sign of a fault but rather at the core of our relationship with God.

When her son Alex died, Carrie says in her paper, she wrapped herself in sacred choral music. Listening over and over to promises of faith sung longingly by church choirs. They led her to a space of compassion, in a time when it would be so tempting to be torn apart by regret, by blame, by anger. Sacred music was, for her, a spiritual practice, a practice of holding on, of feeling held.

Many of us come to places of worship like Grace Covenant, week after week, because we seek embodied worship, sacred songs, the Sacraments, Christian education, community fellowship – These are our spiritual practices. They center us. They bring us back to that feeling of being held, not to escape the world, not to

deny its suffering and traumas and injustices, not to separate your spirit from your body, but rather, just the opposite: they enable us to engage deeply, with our whole selves, with integrity, with complexity. What practices will enable you to move forward, in this next year, in love? Another way to ask the same question, how can we pray for you?

Our congregation is thankful to Lynn Bledsoe and Heather Ferguson for leading an intergenerational Christian education class during advent. Much of the class centered exactly on the types of spiritual practices the author of Colossians calls for: spiritual practices that cultivate love and humility and self-compassion, in all the complexities and griefs and unknowns of our current season. Towards the end of each class, each participant, youth and elder alike, wrote prayers centering on the theme of the day: Hope, Love, Peace, and Joy, on small slips of paper.

As we end, or rather, as we begin, together, as a community, moving into the unknown of a new year, still celebrating the birth of our savior this first Sunday of Christmas, I invite you to pray these prayers with one another. The ushers will pass out to you these prayers. Everyone please take a single slip of paper, pair up with someone beside you, and discuss how this prayer impacts you, how it touches you. Take a moment to pray these prayers together, and whatever other prayers that arise for you in this moment.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, come back. Come back to this moment. Come back to this practice. Come back to this place. As you journey towards the unknown of a new year, come back to these prayers, to this community where we will pray for and with you. When you feel yourself slipping away, find practices of love, of humility, of thankfulness. And remember, even “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” Thanks be to God.