

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland

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It was a beautiful, warm, sunny Saturday in late winter, one that Harry hadn't experienced in a long while. Since November, the grape vines had been buried under a foot of snow which, over the last week, had begun to transform into a mixture melting slushy snow and ice. The driveway was steaming as it warmed up and burnt off the water that had collected on it, a clear sign that spring was on its way. It was the first warm and sunny day in a month or so it seemed and therefore it was quite appropriate to pull the tractor out of the barn, and do some work on it outside on the driveway.

After a delicious lunch, Harry leaned over, and kissed his wife Lena, told her he was so lucky to have a wife like her, and marvelled at how he could be so fortunate, he thanked her for lunch, and walked out of the house to continue working on the tractor.

Lena went about her work, doing the dishes, and out of the corner of her eye she glanced out and noticed Harry in an unusual position on the tractor, but didn't think to much of it, he probably dropped a nut or something else and was bending over to reach it. She continued about her work, and finished up the dishes, and looked out to see if Harry found the nut that he dropped, that's when she noticed that he hadn't moved.

Harry died just how he had prayed for, on his tractor, on his farm. This happened on Saturday, March 13, 2009. Harry was my grandfather. And while this occurred 16 years ago, today, of all days, I continue to remember him.

I'll be honest, death is a tricky subject to discuss at the best of times. Even sharing about experiencing someone's death, as I just did, can be tough for some people. As a culture, our aversion to death goes so far that we have created different ways of talking about death. We use phrases such as "we lost them," "they fell asleep," "they've passed on," "they've gone home", or "they're at rest now" to talk about the reality of death.

For one reason or another, as a culture, we don't like to discuss death, dying, or even suffering for that matter. There are many reasons why we don't talk or prepare for death. For some, it's because they don't want to acknowledge the reality that anyone at any time could die. For others, it's because death is considered an uncertain and frightening thing. And for others yet it could be because of an unwillingness to let go of life as they have or are enjoying it.

For some, death is seen as an enemy, something to be avoided at all costs. And yet, as Henri Nouwen would say, death, besides birth, is the most general, by which he means common, thing that all people will do at some point in their lives. We all must die, just as we all must be born; no one is exempt from death.

And as Christians, death, talking about it, thinking about it, sharing about it, shouldn't bother us. And yet it does.

Take, for instance, our scripture reading today. We'd be forgiven for wanting to skip over the beginning of the story, of Jesus walking into a crowd of mourners, being berated for not coming sooner, walking to a closed tomb, and becoming overwhelmed by his own sadness, to talk about Lazarus' resurrection. The title tells us as much. And yet, a considerable part of the story is about the lead-up to Jesus's miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead.

And yet, the reality is that at some point in all our lives we will have to face the sting of death. And Jesus was no different. In our passage, Jesus gets word that his friend, Lazarus, has died. And once he arrives, is is met by a great throng of mourners. Jesus faces death head-on, the mourners in different stages of grief. And in the shortest verse in the Bible, we see the humanity of Jesus shine through. Jesus weeps.

Commentators are intrigued by this emotional Jesus and have tried to understand what's happening here. Why is Jesus so bothered? John doesn't answer this question; he's not concerned with the why. Instead, he leaves it up to us as readers to wonder. like to think that Jesus' tears come from a place of deep love of love that Jesus has for his friends, family, and indeed, humanity. And so he cries, he mourns, he grieves, just like we do. In this moment, we see Jesus experiencing the fullness of loss as he is led to the resting place of his dear friend. We dwell in this space of sorrow for some time in this story. John lets it sink in just how significant a moment this is. Jesus' friend has died, and there's no rushing your way through grief. Of course, we know this is not the end of the story. Jesus performs the dramatic miracle of raising the very dead Lazarus from the grave.

So why? Is this to show off Jesus' power to the crowd? Is it to confirm his role as a Messiah to the masses? Or maybe it's more personal. Perhaps Jesus raises Lazarus to skip past the grieving and sadness? Bring back his friend whom he was not ready to let go of yet? I don't think it's any of these.

I often suggest that while it might appear that Jesus' miracles were about demonstrating his power, I don't think that's always the case. John's gospel is preoccupied with giving us signs and wonders which point to God. Jesus' miracles were a teaching tool, and I see Jesus using them as something that points us to God and God's Dream.

In this case, the rising of Lazarus demonstrates God's power over death; it sends us the message that in God's kingdom, death no longer holds dominion. The new reality that Jesus is ushering in has no place for death. Death is powerless. This is our hope in the midst of death and sorrow.

As Christians, we live with hope. We are, after all, a people of the resurrection. We have Christ. And Christ has defeated death. Yes, remembering brings up the pain of loss, yes, remembering can cause long-buried emotions to erupt to the surface, and yes, remembering reminds us of the relationship severed by death. And, yes, Hope does not take away the sadness; instead, hope gives us somewhere to go with our sadness.

As an aside, looking back on our scripture, it's curious to note that Jesus does not raise and restore Lazarus to the realm of the living on his own. After raising Lazarus from the dead and calling him out of the tomb, Jesus involves the gathered community in removing the burial cloths and in clothing Lazarus anew. This resurrection isn't a solo affair; it's a community endeavour. Life and Death, in God's Kingdom aren't done alone or in isolation; they are community moments; community events.

I've had people at graveside services ask me, "How do other people grieve, without God and their faith community? It must be so difficult." And in truth, I don't know how other folk do it, but I do know, and can confirm from my own experience, that the care and support of a faith community, in addition to the foundation of our hope and belief in God and Jesus, does make a difference. The despair isn't as murky, grief isn't as deep, and the sorrow isn't as bleak.

Because of Jesus, God knows what it's like to be human, God knows our hurt and our suffering, God knows that we ask the 'why' questions, the questions that don't have answers,

and God feels compassion for us. And I believe this because of God's deep abiding love for humanity.

I started this morning by sharing about my Grandfather's death. And while that occurred 16 years ago, I still remember him. I remember the love shared, the lessons taught, and I remember that when the grief was raw I was never alone, God was there. And I remember, too, that promise, that future, that hope, that death doesn't bind us any more, that in God's Kingdom, we will be reunited.

So as we remember, this morning, whether it is in silence, or with words, with tears or without. God promises to be with us, God promises to comfort us, God promises to comfort God's people, God offers us hope. And on the cusp of Advent we remember this promise of God's.

Amen