

August 19, 2018

TEXT: 2 Samuel 1:17–27

TITLE: Public Grief, Private Love

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Love and grief are two sides of the same coin. We love those close to us, and we lose those close to us. These emotions get to the heart of what it means to be human. But if we forget how to grieve publicly, as a community and as a nation, we also lose the capacity to love as deeply, broadly, and faithfully as God intends.

So I'll say it again: Love and grief are two sides of the same coin. Let's start with love, because that's the more comfortable topic of the two. I'd wager that more ink has been spilt by poets over love than any other topic. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*. Shakespeare Sonnet 18: *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate*. Sonnet 116: *Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, nor bends with the remover to remove*. Love songs fill the radio waves, love cards fill the racks in CVS, love stories fill shelves in bookstores and flicker on movie screens. Love makes the world go round or so we've been told over & over again.

If asked to picture "love," lots of images come to mind. Love is about so much more than sex and physical intimacy. Love is far broader than a stereotypical young married couple on their wedding day. In fact, despite Barrett Browning's noble effort, it actually is impossible to count the ways we love. There is love for parents, love for children, love for pets, love for nature. There is love between family, between friends, between same genders and different genders, same ages and different ages, between same races, nationalities, language groups and different races, nationalities and language groups. In this life, we get the wonderful opportunity to say the words "I love you" to someone else and hopefully we have the good fortune to hear someone speak the words "I love you" back to us.

At the end of David's lament, as recorded in 2 Samuel 1, we hear words of love:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. David openly proclaimed his love for Jonathan, who tragically died in the Battle of Gilboa alongside his father, King Saul. Jonathan was the crown prince. But over and over again he showed steadfast love and loyalty to David, despite David being a clear rival for the throne of Israel. David named their love, honored their love, and included it as part of this public song of grief. I will not restrict the boundaries of the love those two men shared, just as I would not attempt to catalog the expressions of love you each have known in your lives. In the end, there are lots of loves in this world, which is how God has intended it to be, and whether in times of joy or sadness, it is always appropriate to speak of those we love.

Once David learned of the death of Saul and Jonathan, he gathered the people together and not only said his words of lament but also ordered that the people memorize his words so that they would be united in their grief and honor the slain glory of Israel. Then, as now, there is a power in public grief. It binds us together and reminds us of a narrative bigger than our own little story. Think of the people for whom we grieve together. How often in the past few days, once you heard about the death of Aretha Franklin, did you spell out for yourself R-E-S-P-E-C-T? I would also note the recent death of Dr. Katie Cannon, ethicist and theologian and the first African American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church who worked faithfully for racial justice.

Private grief shared with others becomes public grief. Commonly we experience public grief as a response to national tragedies. Think of Walt Whitman putting pen to paper after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and writing, *O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done—the ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won...But O heart! heart! heart! O the bleeding drops of red, where on the deck my Captain lies, fallen cold and dead.* Think about the national grief we felt after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, the pain and outrage expressed after 9/11, the heart-rending sadness that followed the shooting of the children at Sandy Hook elementary school.

It is one thing to mourn an individual person. We weep tears. We feel a heaviness of heart or are surprised at how easily something insignificant—a photo or souvenir—can bring our grief for a dead loved one roaring back to the surface. What I want to stress is that our acts of public grieving help us learn how to grieve privately. The ability to grieve together—to move outside our own bubble of self-focus to feel sadness for someone else, maybe someone we've never met but who is still a child of God—that is a mark of real humanity and of real faith. Public grief gives us a shared language. It helps us make sense of this world together in times of life and health as well as times of death and loss.

There have been examples of national tragedy in recent months—the shooting at Parkland High School, the racist march in Charlottesville, Virginia—but, I'm sorry to say, our President and national leaders did not help us grieve together. The last time there was this type of national leadership was at the funeral for the minister Rev. Pinckney, killed in the tragic shooting at the Mother Immanuel AME Church, when President Obama paused from his text and simply did this: (sing first verse "Amazing Grace") There—that was a form of shared grief and shared faith. You just embodied our national motto: *E pluribus unum*—out of many, one.

David showed similar leadership in leading Israel in an act of public grieving after the death of Saul and Jonathan. Three times he intoned the phrase, *How the mighty have fallen!* He named how this grief over Saul and Jonathan was real, and not something to be mocked or diminished by the Philistine victors from Gath or Ashkelon. This grief was real and touched all of them; even the hills and mountains of Gilboa that saw these deaths should now become parched and dry. David named their shared loss, even as he pointed to the tragic nature of all war—the shed blood of the slain, the loss

of innocent life and noble sons. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished and become as naught.

Times of public grief give us a shared vocabulary for remembering what is most important in life. We take comfort in regularly hearing at funerals the words of the 23rd Psalm (“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”) or singing the verses of “Amazing Grace.” Because if what is spoken or sung when someone I love dies is also spoken or sung when someone famous or important nationally dies, then there is a connection between my private grief and the grief everyone else is feeling. There is a connection between my world of loss and pain, and the order of the universe out there.

My preaching professor Tom Long has written a lot about death. He has said that we may gather at funerals to celebrate the unique life of the deceased person we love, and we may organize funerals to help people process the grief they’re feeling. But ultimately the point of a Christian funeral service is to provide a structure and shared language for worshiping God at the time of death. Funerals are sessions of public grief and public worship, naming our honest-to-God sadness as well as our honest-to-God hope that flows from a faith in a living Lord. David’s words about Saul and Jonathan were a psalm of lament, lifted to God from the honest pain he felt.

In the same way, the New Testament scriptures teach us a language of grief and remembrance that comforts us in our individual times of loss and forms us into a common people of faith and hope. At the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples, *In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live...Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also* (Jn 14:1,3,19). The church has always connected these words about death with words about love. In John 15, Jesus said *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*. This sentiment is at the heart of the famous verse from John 3: *God so loved the world that God gave the only Son as the way to eternal life*.

To conclude: Faith has neither a narrowly defined love nor a narrowly defined grief. So hear again what I said at the beginning. Love and grief are two sides of the same coin. The ability to love and to appreciate the many ways love is expressed means we can move beyond our self-focus and connect with others, knowing that these connections at times will include tears and public grief over the tragedies of this world. In these broad definitions of love and this openness to shared grief lies the pathway to a living, honest faith. For as the apostle Paul said, we are not to grieve as ones without hope (I Thess 4:13). As real as our times of loss may be, they are no match for the height and depth and breadth of love present in this, God’s world, redeemed by Jesus Christ. This good news is for this life and the life to come, as it says in the old hymn: *O Love that will not let me go; I rest my weary soul in thee—I give thee back the life I owe that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be*. When we hold onto this good news, this broad love and open, public grief as people of God and God’s hope in Jesus Christ, then these words are also true: *When we’ve been there ten*

thousand years, bright shining as the sun—we've no less time to sing God's praise then when we've first begun.

AMEN