

PASTOR'S MESSAGE

Westside Lutheran Church - Pastor Sonja Free
9th Sunday after Pentecost, August 2, 2020

Grace and peace be unto you from God our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit our Guide and Counsellor Amen

Grief and Compassion in the midst of so many losses during COVID19

A knock is heard at the door. Keith goes to answer it. A policeman is standing at the door. He tells Keith that his two adult children have been killed in a head on collision. It turned out that the driver of the other car was drunk. What a violent, senseless happening! Keith and his wife are devastated. **Life is put on hold**. None of us can even **begin** to imagine what they were experiencing unless we have had a similar experience. (hang on to this little scenario)

Now, think about how our gospel begins. Jesus has just been told of the violent death of his cousin John at the hand of ruler Herod. John was the **one person who really understood who Jesus was and his mission in the world** and now he was dead. In the Matthew account, it just mentions Jesus leaving what he is doing and getting into a boat to go to a quiet place. The other two accounts in Mark and Luke mention that his disciples went with him. Jesus recognizes what they have just been through and he knows what he is feeling. **Life needs to be put ON HOLD in order to process what has just happened....to feel what is going on inside of them and to pray**. We don't know what the prayer conversations were. We can only imagine... for instance....might these be a few of Jesus' prayer thoughts? **"Why such a senseless, violent death? John was the one who had such a strong faith in you Lord! I feel so alone. How do I move forward? I feel so lost. Take my hand – hold me, guide me, lead me."**

Perhaps some of these thoughts were also ones that Keith and his wife (in the opening scenario) had as they looked to God for strength.

Could these be some of the thoughts that are going through some of our minds as we grieve

the many losses that have come about because of COVID19 – this world wide pandemic? Some have lost loved ones to the pandemic; others have lost loved ones for other health reasons – **either way, the normal grief rituals have been suspended** – and we feel lost. Then there are **all the other losses being experienced**, such as being laid off from work; permanent closing of businesses, plans for future endeavours cancelled and the list goes on...and WE are left to grieve.

As I have been thinking about all these things, I am reminded of the old hymn “**Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley**”

1. **Jesus walked this lonesome valley he had to walk it by himself;**

Oh, nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself;

2. **You must walk this lonesome valley; you have to walk it by yourself**

Oh, nobody else can walk it for you, you have to walk it by yourself”

How true! No one else could get into Jesus' mind and take on that walk, just as no one could do that for Keith and his wife, nor for us in our sorrows.

However, let us remember that there is one who can step into our minds and that is GOD. There were **prayers** between Jesus and God; between his disciples and God. **It is in prayer that God's grace steps in; giving courage to live into the next moments, hours and days.**

There is that comforting verse in Deuteronomy 33:27a “**the eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms**” Perhaps Jesus and/or the disciples remembered it. It certainly is one for us to store in our memory banks. It feels like being cradled in God's arms of love.

Now, much as Jesus would have wanted to spend more time in prayer in that boat or quiet place, he sees the crowds coming towards him and wanting his attention. We are told that he has COMPASSION on them. . What does “compassion” mean? It has to do with “entering into the deep waters of another's pain” and, very importantly, aspiring to relieve it. (p.4 and 9 – Alive Now Jan./Feb.2014) Although Jesus is hurting inside, he doesn't send them away. He heals them That means there is no anger or frustration in his voice, only a tone of caring. Just an important aside here – even though Jesus did not get to have a lot of time in prayer here, there are many other instances in scripture where we are told he went aside

to pray. **Prayer is a most important component in his earthly life. It is prayer that refuels him, brings balance into his life.** We, too, are told that prayer is to be uppermost in our lives. Our world today will never be the same as it was back in February but we are to move forward. It is in **that praying**, that WE are also called to journey with **compassion** for others in all the present chaos.

I cannot help but think of the recent articles I have read about so many front-line hospital staff caring for those with COVID19. They have seen so many people dying. Since family members have not been able to stay with them, it is the staff who are reaching out in comfort, holding hands, consoling, wiping brows, speaking soft words of love as many of them are taking their last breaths here on earth. Compassion has prevailed over the grief of these front-line workers. I believe God has been there holding the staff in their pain, loving them and moving them to show compassion to others. God has been, is, and will be there in the midst of it all!

God was with Keith and his wife helping them to lovingly share their story and what helped them cope, with others who had had similar happenings. God is here with us, cradling us when we can't figure out what to do next. God, in compassion and love, speaks gently to our hearts so we are able to reach out to others in love. **Our God truly is an awesome God filled with power, wisdom and love! Amen.**