

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
4th Sunday of Lent, Year B
March 15, 2015

Our theme that we have set for Lent this year is "Out of the dust of grief, light rises." It is not only absolutely theologically correct and appropriate for this season, and in my mind sums up the resurrection is one concise statement, it was also chosen because we know there is grief among us who sit in these pews week after week.

This is not unique to us in our parish, for nearly in everyone's heart there is a hole, which seems impossible to fill. Inside ourselves we may feel this pain; and yet outside ourselves we may wear a calloused look, that says we're okay.

There may have been someone or something that we needed to let go of recently; there may be a change to something we treasured, that we can't quite find our way around to; there may have been something we loved or felt a sense of purpose by doing, that we can no physically longer do, and we grieve who we used to be.

There may be a spot of conflict in our lives, which like a pebble in our shoe, we do our best to repress or ignore, rather than trying to resolve it or rid ourselves of the constant reminder. Sometimes what we cannot control, we constrain. But we do not heal.

Changes happen, and often with change, there comes a sense of loss. It's deeply sad for me to share with you the worsening condition of Deacon Janice, for I know for many, this pain is or will be raw and easily inflamed, and we may not be sure what to do with it.

We often build our defenses, higher and higher, always on the ready to protect ourselves from the place of deepest pain, but as we do this, indeed we do not heal.

Why do you think we so naturally hold onto pain?

"I'm fine", we say when we do not mean it.

"Nothing's wrong" we say when we seethe with hurt.

"That's life", we snap when life has struck so hard we would prefer no life at all.

"Just ignore it", we say when hurt drives out joy, stampedes trust, consumes our hearts, and saps our every thought.

And yet, there is a time to heal.

But how? That's actually what our lessons tell us today.

Healing requires that we reach out, not necessarily to those who have hurt us, but at least to something that gives us new life, new hope, new pleasure. Healing is the process of refusing to be wounded, and allowing the light of Christ to illumine our darkness, and light the pathway out.

Because if we really believe the statement, out of the dust of grief, light rises, we know that God already has something else in mind for us, and all we need to do is to figure out how to reach toward the divine cure?

We have been focusing on this theme of grief, loss, and hope, in this season because Lent is a time when we go inward, into the depths and crevices of our souls, and we often find grief residing there, lurking in the shadows, ready to spring forth at any moment.

And yet Lent is also a season to come together, to worship more often and more intentionally, to reflect and study together through our Lenten series, to explore a deeper sense of community, which we know can give us the strength to tackle that which we have found difficult within.

We are also having this conversation in Lent about grief because the ultimate goal of Lent is to prepare us for the deep healing that comes through the death of God's beloved.

In our very interesting stories today, we learn that those who look to the cross are healed, just as those who suffered the serpent's fire in the wilderness were healed by looking at what would otherwise have killed them.

In one form, death on the cross brought about a loss of life. Jesus' body was broken and taken down from the cross and buried in a tomb. In another form, the crucifixion brought to us a fullness of life, beyond our imagination. Divine love filled the world at that worst moment of human history and offered us a life that does not end.

I invite you to stay with this thought for a moment, that that which kills us, causes our death, or separates us, or causes distance between us and others or us and God, turns out to be the exact thing that actually saves us.

It's a fairly mind-boggling concept.

This conjunction of the source of death with the source of healing in the death of Jesus on the cross, begs our question: how is Jesus' cross the source of our death and also of our healing? Not for all of humanity, but specifically for us.

The answer to that question resides in your response to what are you going to write on that slip of paper, which you will physically nail to the cross on Good Friday. It is in that service that we write the worst of ourselves and lift it high upon the cross.

As we prepare for Holy Week, it is absolutely essential that we each reflect upon and name that part of us that we need to die with Jesus on the cross. I urge you to ask yourself: what are you going to lift high on the cross to rid yourself of, so that you may be healed? Perhaps it is a litany of grudges you hold onto, perhaps it is deeply rooted anger, that you thought you let go of, but just keeps creeping back in. Perhaps it is an addiction; perhaps it is an unwillingness to trust or to be vulnerable before others, or an unhealthy attachment to a spouse or a child, or the regular by-products of our human condition of greed, self-absorption, or focus on materialism.

This claiming and naming of that which causes our death is an integral part of our healing. Faithful repentance is necessary, because our lessons today speak to us of the eternal life, the life lived in the knowledge and presence of God, which is ours for the claiming, when we have the courage to rid ourselves of that which we have placed as obstacles to this renewed and faithful life, which is full of the light of Christ.

We need to name our demons, and not just put them at the foot of the cross, but also place them high, where the light can shine upon them, where the world and we can see them, and Christ can make a difference in drawing them away from us.

For when we put our sins, our brokenness, our smallness, our pettiness high upon the cross, something miraculous happens. The face of Christ looks through them and beyond them to see within us, the whole person waiting to emerge.

Deacon Carenda shaped my entire Lenten season when she preached on Ash Wednesday. I know I'm paraphrasing, so it may not be word-for-word, but what my heart heard was that "God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us." God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us. We never need to worry about judgment from God; for God looks at us with eyes of mercy and forgiveness. We can trust God with the worst of ourselves, and know that God will respond with drawing us into the best of ourselves.

This is remarkable. This is the good news. God's mercy and grace cause us to realize our need for our new life, for joy and hope, which helps us know our utter dependence on God, through whom, through God's beloved hung upon a cross, that we are healed.

I know I have told you this before, but it is one of the deep truths revealed to me as a priest, which plays out in each of our lives ~ whenever I celebrate the Eucharist, the moment when I break the bread is the worst moment – and the best moment of my week. It is the time I am most aware of my inadequacies, my brokenness, my weaknesses – and those of all of humanity, which brought Jesus to that cross. There is a part of me which has to claim that I am somewhat responsible for the death of Christ – that the same blindness, the same desire to hold onto a set of beliefs that is comfortable and had been told to me to be true, the same desire to push away those

who believe differently than me, has found it's place, from time to time, within my own heart. And I always feel like falling to my knees in shame.

And then grace happens, and as I am in this place of truth telling and repentance, the flood of divine love comes pouring in. I am wondrously reminded of, as Madeline L'Engle calls, the gloriously impossible Divine love, which crowds out all else, and draws us into a place of forgiveness, and invitation to a new life.

This is what makes me trust God. That week after week, God shows up. Takes my imperfect life and infuses it with hope, balance, restoration, and most of all new possibilities in a life of Christ.

This is a gift offered to each one of you. During Lent, when we offer you the broken bread, we say to you, "The body of Christ, broken for you". Broken for you, so that you may be made whole.

The first step is in owning our brokenness. The second step is finding new ideas in which to live. We must trust in God. Trust there is newness build into our weakness or brokenness.

Lent is a time of repentance and decision. Let us decide to offer the worst of ourselves to the healing love of Christ, so we may be made whole; so we may life into all which God created us to be, for we can trust, that as God's beloved was put to death upon the cross, beneath it all is the pulsing of God's steadfast love. We are saved from our sins FOR life, not from death, but for life. Let us see the face of Christ peering through our brokenness, showering us with love, inviting us into all goodness, and making us whole. Amen.