

Tending our Spirits in Grief and in Gratitude

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Around this time last year, I left Wollaston Congregational Church in Quincy, having served as sole pastor for seven years. And so, I have not been attending First Church for very long. But I did visit here one summer Sunday a few years ago.

It was one of those Sundays when preaching coverage had been planned but didn't work out, due to an emergency. So former senior pastor, Dan Smith, led the service in an informal way: he handed out sheets printed with excerpts from his favorite psalms and shared with the summer congregation the way that the psalms had given him comfort and encouragement. I was really moved by the authenticity of the service. I valued the sheet of psalms and kept it for a while, to guide me in prayer.

As I left, I introduced myself to Dan and he apologized for the fact that there had not been a regular sermon. But I was not disappointed, I had been fed by our time of praying the psalms together.

Since I've returned to First Church, I've noticed that a psalm has often served as the focus scripture for the sermon. This is a testament to this congregation who leans into the poetic wisdom literature of the scriptures. The book of psalms, sometimes known as Israel's Song Book, is a collection of poetry that can be spoken and sung, prayed and chanted, in worship and in private prayer. The psalms don't tell us what to do. They don't provide solutions. Instead, they give voice to us - the community - to our grief and our longing, to our lamentation and confession, and to our gratitude and praise.

Today, I invite us to lean into the psalm for this Sunday. The excerpt we read just now is the latter part of the psalm: a resolution of a lament and plea for mercy.

It is thought that this psalm was written in response to the return of the people of Israel from 70 years of exile in Babylon. The people had longed to return home to Jerusalem, while they had been captive in that foreign land. It is unlikely any of those returnees had seen the "home" they longed for. Instead, the land had been the focus of the memories and remembrances of their elders. It had become a kind of dreamland.

Now the people have returned to the land, promised to Abraham long ago.

Instead of the city of their handed-down memories, they face a changed landscape. Jerusalem is in ruins, the fields around the city lie barren.

In this passage, the psalmist remembers God's favor in the past and hopes for that same relationship in the future. The poet imagines the holy attributes of steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace springing up from the ground and raining down from the sky. They meet and tenderly kiss as they embrace the community.

Generations later, Christians had a similar vision of the presence of God in the person of Jesus. We know Jesus as the one who lived and traveled in that same land, making the attributes of love, faithfulness, justice and peace known among the people.

This summer time, First Church is in the midst of a changing landscape. The transition from the tenure of the beloved and long-time senior pastor, Rev. Dan Smith began in early June. And our church eagerly waits to welcome the interim senior pastor, Rev. Mike Solberg, in the fall. But for now, we have an in-between time. A pause between pastors.

Now this is a healthy, thriving church with many meaningful ministries. Still, it will not be the same as before. Dan Smith made such a mark on this church, he cannot be let go without grief in the midst of gratitude for the time spent together. This pause is the perfect time to acknowledge and express our feelings about the loss we have experienced as a community.

Also, many members of this congregation are experiencing grief over other things besides Dan's departure. There are individual losses for which we grieve: the loss of parents, life partners, children, and dear friends. There are also losses due to changes in our life circumstances: the loss of colleagues and community following retirement; the loss of the role of caretaker as children leave the nest; the loss of independence as elders transition into assisted living or eldercare.

As well as the personal losses we face, our world and our culture is also living through a time of loss and grief. As the rate of climate change increases, we are warned by scientists that we are losing the world as it used to be.

We are losing ice that regulates the temperature of the seas. We are losing beloved creatures, particularly those whose habitat in those colder oceans. We are also losing human habitat, particularly in the poorest parts of the world, as global temperatures rise to intolerable levels.

And in addition to environmental losses, we are also losing many seemingly timeless institutions. Some institutions, like healthcare and education, are under stress. Others, like local churches, cannot keep up with cultural changes accelerated in these post-pandemic times. There is also a genuine fear, around the world, that we are on the brink of losing the institution of democracy. Author Brian McLaren recently published a book "Life After Doom: Wisdom and

Courage for a World Falling Apart.” (I know, no one can accuse McLaren of sugar coating the reality.)

In an early chapter McLaren presents four possible outcomes of the current trend of environmental disaster and the destabilization of human institutions. Then he leads readers through ways to “mind their minds”- though I would say “tend our spirits” – as we process the heartbreak of the losses coming to our world and to humanity. McLaren encourages his readers to embrace grief for what is being lost, while expressing gratitude for what has been. And he leans into poetry to provide expression for that grief and gratitude.

McLaren speaks of his own grief in these times: “ ... grief for our children because of the unstable climate we are leaving them ... grief for what we could have done but didn’t... grief for all the beauty that will be desecrated between this point and the end point of any one of the four scenarios we have considered ... so much grief.”¹

McLaren doesn’t only focus on grief for the culture and for the world. He describes the grief of losing his parents, after a long lives well-lived. He had a good relationship with each of them. This is not the complicated grief that some people suffer. McLaren had the privilege of bittersweet grief.

He says “Sometimes, the very personal ache of grief inside me seemed to expand outward, like rings of compassion for everyone everywhere who had been or ever would be touched by loss.”²

He invites the reader into this experience: “... let’s[wake] up and [welcome] ourselves to reality. Let’s ... mind our mind (tend our spirit)... [so that] we can learn to drop down into the sweet current of deep grief that helps us appreciate —to know, to praise, and more fully to love— all that we are losing, all that may soon be lost.”³

I can relate, I also had the privilege of bittersweet grief. My dad died a couple of years ago, during my penultimate year with the Wollaston congregation. I had begun to grieve my dad, as his health began to fail. He lived with my mother in the UK, and during the first couple of years of the pandemic, I feared that I would not be able to travel there and see him alive again.

Thankfully, I was able to have a couple more visits before he went into the hospital where he died. This was the relatively peaceful end of a life well-lived. We - the family and the community around him – grieved his loss because we loved him and appreciated him.

¹ McLaren, Brian D. *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart* (p. 51). St. Martin’s Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid. (p. 52).

³ Ibid. (p. 54).

Around this time, after a long period of hard discernment it became clear that Wollaston Congregational Church's ministry was reaching the end of its life. The small congregation had the courage to begin the UCC "Legacy Church" process and began to imagine what their lives of faith would be like if their church was to close.

Most important of all, they needed to grieve. This was the place where so many of their most significant life events had been acknowledged and celebrated: births, deaths, marriages. It was the place where they were consoled when their hearts were breaking and where gave thanks for the good things in their lives.

The focus of our ministry together became "tending our spirits" in the midst of this period of grief.

Acknowledging my bittersweet grief for my dad, allowed me to empathize with the grief of the congregation. There was grief but there was also gratitude. When we experience bittersweet grief, we are sad to lose this person, this relationship, this institution, this place, because we have loved them.

We cannot know the precise mindset of the psalmist and their community at the time that psalm 85 was first prayed, sung or chanted. But we can imagine that they were grieving over their desolate land, grieving for the memory of beauty and abundance their predecessors gave them.

The psalmist leads the people in their lament, and then draws them into a time of praise for who God is. Their land may be barren, but God's Presence will be embodied in their community. This Presence is fertile with steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace. This vision is how the psalmist tends the people's spirits as they weather these difficult times.

And perhaps – First Church - this is also how we may tend our spirits: in this time of pause between senior pastors. As our present culture faces enormous losses, may we lean into bittersweet grief and gratitude or the changing landscape in this place. May we lean into the poetry of the psalms.

And, this Sunday, as we imagine a future culture fertile with God's Presence – may we move forward in faith: that this community would embody God's steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace, made known for us in the person of Jesus.

May all God's people say,
Amen