

What Is Reconciliation? Being Granted Eternal Rest

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Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-45

My grandmother, my father's mother, Janet Isabel Tennant Wilkinson, died 40 years ago this past week. Though I had seen a dead body before, this was my first real experience with death. I was in eighth grade. I remember it vividly. Her illness, her failing body and her deteriorating mind. My grandfather's tender care for her. Our family's regular weekend visits to provide support. I remember calls between my father and various doctors as they discussed care protocols long-distance. I remember a call one night when my dad said "we don't want to do that," the right decision but one that accelerated her decline. I remember when she was moved from their home to a care facility for only really a brief time, and the call late at night informing my father that she had died. I remember the visitation at the funeral home, when that practice was much more common.

I remember the funeral – the first time I remember seeing my father cry. I remember the hymns – of course I do because I am a hymn weirdo. "Come, Christians, Join to Sing" and "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." (Parenthetically, we will sing those at my service, so if you are present, please sing exuberantly, because I won't be able to!)

I remember the burial. Like many families, my parents had thought about this but had not put everything into place. They must have gotten a deal – eight plots for the price of six or something like that, at the Rose Hill cemetery in Akron. There was space for my two grandparents, and my parents. But what to do with the other four? Three siblings, so that leaves one. But what if any of the kids were to be partnered? Who gets left out? And what if any of the partners, after careful consideration, really didn't want to be buried in Akron, Ohio, as fine of a municipality as it is? Years later I finally broke it to my very frugal mother that the likelihood of Bonny and me, or just me, for that matter, being buried in Akron was slim. She understood...kind of. I remember all of it. The experiences and the feelings. Grief, relief, gratitude. Lots of laughter. Lots of tears.

Why do I tell you this? Not for its uniqueness, but for its universality. Though we all have our particular stories of death – sudden, tragic, too soon, natural, expected, unexpected – that’s the point. We all have stories of death. Faith certainly doesn’t inoculate us from death, nor does it sanitize the experience. What faith does – and this is a crucial understanding of reconciliation – is allow us journey with death in a different way, whether it’s our own or those we love.

Before the plagues of wind and snow put today’s special choral music on hold, we had planned to connect the text of the “Lux Aeterna,” “eternal light,” with a discussion about death and reconciliation. It is still a conversation worth having, because the affirmation in the text of the music resides at the core of what we believe. “To deliver us, you became human...Having blunted the sting of death, You opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.” “Come, Holy Spirit, and send forth from heaven the ray of thy light...thou best of consolers...” “Lamb of God, who takest away the sin of the world, grant them rest everlasting. May light eternal shine upon them, O Lord, in the company of thy Saints for ever and ever; for thou art merciful. Rest eternal grant to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.”

That is what we believe, that God will console those who grieve – all of us – and that God’s perpetual light will shine on those who die, God’s eternal rest will be theirs. That makes grief no less real nor death any less present, but it places those experiences and that reality in the promise and vision of God’s reconciling light.

We will encounter the same passage this week and next from John’s gospel, for different reasons. Lazarus is ill, seemingly deathly so. Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha, are deeply concerned. This scene has played out in your families, I am sure. They send a message to Jesus asking him to come quickly, presumably to heal him. They do not receive the message they want to hear – Jesus dismisses the illness and stays where he is for two more days.

Then Jesus acts. He knows that Lazarus is dead. Dead and buried. Many are consoling the sisters, but Martha blames Jesus, declaring that his tardiness allowed for the death to happen. She is unafraid to take on Jesus. Mary then repeats Martha’s accusation. Jesus is touched by the whole thing, moved and disturbed in spirit. Jesus instructs that the burial stone be rolled away, and amid protests, it is. “Lazarus, come out,” Jesus proclaims. And he does.

Read the story again sometime soon. There is so much nuance and emotion, from the sisters, from the crowd, from Jesus himself. The quick summary would be about Jesus' miraculous works, and that indeed matters. Scholars assert that this episode of Jesus' raising of Lazarus serves as a kind of preview of Easter morning, including the very act of rolling away the stone. So we mustn't dismiss that at all.

But what interests me in this moment is what we can learn about death and life, and faith, from this story, in our own lives, when Jesus is not here in the flesh to revive our beloved dead. We certainly claim the faith about resurrection and eternal life, life beyond death in God's eternal presence. Yet what about now, as we walk in the valley of the shadow of death?

This week a beloved colleague died, another valued colleague received a tough cancer diagnosis. How do we face death, navigate our own mortality and the mortality of those we love. What does reconciliation look like? We will claim resurrection's promise in just a few weeks, but in the meantime, in the flesh-and-blood meantime, what do we do?

Look at the story. What does it tell us? We take grief seriously. Mary and Martha are heartbroken about their brother's decline and death. Heartbroken. Grief is real and palpable. Too often we are taught that faith should lead us to passive acceptance. Not here. This is real grief. This is real sadness. This is real anger, even. We can envision the tears flowing, not sweetly, but powerfully and passionately, for a lost brother.

Time was when we spoke of a grief "process," about stages of grief, a kind of emotional checklist we move through to lead to some conclusion. The more I am around death, the more I think that a fallacy. I think of death as a journey – two steps forward, one back, three sideways. I will speak with many of you who after a year or five or ten will still hear your beloved one's voice, will still shed a tear, will still feel a wave rush over you. Grief is a journey, and faith doesn't dilute or erase or sanitize it.

Grief is real. And so is compassion. Jesus is compassionate here. Though he stays away too long for his friends' tastes, because they are waiting for that miracle, nonetheless he is moved. This is Jesus at his most human and compassionate. Jesus weeps, even as he anticipates the positive outcome. He weeps with compassion for his friends and their grief.

And note also the community. It cares for these two women. It cares. It consoles. It protects. It does the equivalent of bringing a casserole, or a tray of brownies, of offering prayers, of seeing what can be done. The community surrounded those who were grieving and worried never so much about what to say, or what not to say, then simply showing up. A ministry of presence, it is called, and it is what we are called to practice as well. As real as grief is, consolation is real, and compassion, and care. It's what we know how to do. Even when we can't sense God's rod and staff comforting us, we can certainly experience comfort from those around us. And we can certainly be emissaries of that comfort to those who grieve.

It would be easy, because of the stereotypes of faith that formed many of us, to head straight to Easter without Lent, without Good Friday. That is to say, it would be easy to accept platitudes like "it was God's will" or "now she or he is in a better place" or the like. But life is not like that. Nor is faith. We, and those we love, like Jesus, will walk the lonesome valley called death. Resurrection will come, to be sure. We believe that. But resurrection will not sidestep the death that precedes it, nor gloss over it. Death will come, to those we love. Death will come, to us. And grief will be real.

But the story teaches us that we can lean on a community of reconciliation who will support and console, led by the very human Jesus who travels in solidarity and who even weeps for us.

We say regularly that "in life and in death we belong to God." That is what reconciliation looks like. Belonging to God. Our Confession of 1967 affirms that: "Life in Christ is life eternal. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign that God will consummate the work of creation and reconciliation beyond death and bring to fulfillment the new life begun in Christ."

What is reconciliation? Reconciliation takes grief, it takes death itself, and reframes and redirects it, in the promise of eternal light and in the hope of eternal rest. New and eternal life that begins now, and abides forever. Amen.

In earlier sermon drafts, I included these two readings...

"I'm dying. Maybe it will take longer instead of shorter; maybe I'll preach for several months, and maybe for a bit more. But I am dying. I know it, and I hate it,

and I'm still frightened by it. But there is hope, unwavering hope. I have hope not in something I've done, some purity I've maintained, or some sermon I've written. I hope in God—the God who reaches out for an enemy, saves a sinner, dies for the weak.”

~James Van Tholen, “Surprised by Death”

When death comes/ like the hungry bear in autumn;/ when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse / to buy me, and snaps the purse shut; / when death comes / like the measles-pox /

when death comes / like an iceberg between the shoulder blades, / I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: / what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness? / And therefore I look upon everything/ as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, / and I look upon time as no more than an idea, / and I consider eternity as another possibility, / and I think of each life as a flower, as common / as a field daisy, and as singular, / and each name a comfortable music in the mouth, / tending, as all music does, toward silence,/ and each body a lion of courage, and something / precious to the earth. / When it's over, I want to say all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. / When it's over, I don't want to wonder / if I have made of my life something particular, and real. / I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, / or full of argument. / I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

~Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes”