

What to Do With a Broken Heart

Lamentations 1:1-4
Luke 13:1-8

October 8, 2017
Faith Community

I woke up Monday morning to the news of the deadliest mass shooting in American history. As the week progressed I tried to avoid hearing yet again the gosh-awful gunfire that roared from the 32nd floor of that hotel. I didn't want to watch the panicked crowds for the umpteenth time. Once was enough for that as well, but as you well know, there was no escaping it.

And what followed had long ago become heartbreakingly predictable.

Photos of the victims
Learning what we could about the shooter
An occasional story of sacrificial bravery
Endless gun debates
Accusations
Conspiracy theories
The list goes on

As that Monday morning moved on, I noticed something happening in me. My daily devotions were especially penetrating that day, but when I turned to regular weekday stuff, I couldn't do it. I really couldn't. Instead, I kept turning away from the computer, putting my head in my hands, and going back to Scripture and silence.

Please don't think this was something spooky, freaky or weird, because it wasn't that at all. It *was* a physical thing. I *knew* it was happening. And for a *while*, at least, I obeyed. It became one of those formative moments that I'll be working on for quite some time.

That was Monday. And by Tuesday I knew I couldn't preach on what I had originally planned for today.

Two things came to me. First of all is that as a nation as well as families and individuals, we don't do grief as well as we could. There are books on the subject, of course, along with clinical reports and even conferences for professionals, but most of us don't do it well and end up paying a price because of it.

In some ways I think it's a variation on the saying, 'Never let them see you sweat.' That's a sign of weakness and could be detrimental in athletics, business decisions,

negotiations, and on and on. In this case it can be 'Never let them see you cry.' We may give ourselves a day or two for such things, but no more than that. When we fall victim to this we simply make the tragedy all the more intense.

So, instead of grieving in a healthy way, we treat it like other emotional issues like anger, jealousy, envy, the list goes on. We stuff that stuff.

We'll handle it ourselves; at least that's what we say. It's like a tea kettle on high with the little hole plugged up. The heat and pressure continue to build, it has to go somewhere, and if there's no release, eventually there's an explosion of some kind.

I think it helped lead to the death of my father at the age of 47, and the suicide of my brother at 30. Shortly before he died his wife asked him why he drank so much, and he said, 'because it's the only way I can forget.' I don't think he knew how to grieve.

Pay attention to Scripture here, friends. There's an entire book in the Bible devoted to the expression of grief. Even its title speaks of it: Lamentations. It's written in the aftermath of Israel's destruction and the subsequent deportation of its people. Listen to how it starts:

**How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.**
(Lam 1:1, NRSV)

The Psalms are filled with this. Friends, become students of Scripture. It could very well save your life. Otherwise you might become like the rest of the world, caught up with violence, blame, revenge and other forms of self-destructive behavior.

If learning to grieve is my first point, here's number two. It comes from a passage in the Gospel of Luke that most people don't spend much time with.

Two tragedies were discussed. One was at the hands of the government in power at the time. The second one involved the death of eighteen people who apparently were in the wrong place at the wrong time. A structure, a tower,

perhaps part of a city wall, had collapsed, claiming multiple lives. It was in all the headlines and was the talk of the town.

Jesus' response may seem hard hearted, but dig a little deeper and you'll find something profound. Back then there was the thought that somehow people deserved what they got. Your sins would catch up with you. Instead, Jesus says this:

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. (Luke 13:2-5)

Friends, you've heard me say this many times. We may not be able to control what happens to us, but we do have something to say about how we respond. In other words, this is the time for repentance, for character formation, for growth in our own maturity and discernment. The world is aching for what you and I all too often take for granted.

A young man approached his rabbi one day and said, "Rabbi, I want you to know that I've become an atheist." The rabbi replied, "An Atheist. Well, that's a big decision. So tell me, when did you become an atheist?"

"Wednesday," the young man said.

"Wednesday, well I guess that's as good a day to become an atheist as any other. So tell me, how was your life different on Thursday, after having become an atheist on Wednesday?"

"It wasn't different at all."

"Well, then, maybe you've been an atheist all along."

Friends, we may call ourselves Christians, but all too often we live as functional atheists, since we live like the world around us.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always

dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (Romans 12:2, TMSG)

Friends, the world will change when you and I change. Living a good life is not enough. Paying your bills, staying out of trouble, going to church when you can, that's not going to change the world, let alone you. In reality, it never could.

In the aftermath of tragedy, whether it involves a single person or hundreds, or even more, we are so very vulnerable, and also susceptible to influences that may be less than healthy. What better opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ to step forward and present a better way, the only way.