

Sermon for Epiphany 6, February 12, 2023

I really struggled with my sermon this week. Whenever this reading about divorce comes up, I feel I need to say something about it, because the church used it for years to force women to stay in abusive relationships, and we have since realised that that was wrong. Jesus is talking here to men who could divorce their wives for any and every reason. She burns the toast, he gives her a certificate of divorce and kicks her out. She is left destitute and he can go find someone else. Jesus says this is wrong. I believe he is trying to tell the men to take a bit more responsibility for their marriages and to care for their wives.

Women, on the other hand, couldn't divorce their husbands for any reason at all. So, Jesus wasn't talking to them. It's a bit ironic that the church has used this to force women to continue to take all the responsibility for a marriage, a kind of "blame the victim, tell her to work harder" kind of thing, when Jesus was really saying just the opposite. The Anglican church has long seen that this interpretation was just wrong and has long since repented for the bad advice given to women. And if any of you received that sort of advice, I apologize to you on behalf of the church. And if any of you are in abusive relationships and want to leave, I will support you in that. I believe it's what Jesus would do.

I could say more, but my heart wasn't really in that topic. I've said it to you before, many times. I hope I don't need to say more about it. I could also have talked about the Corinthian readings where Paul is telling people not to quarrel and be jealous and have different factions in the church. That's always fruitful. Lots of good advice there. But my heart wasn't in that either.

My heart was where I think many of your hearts have been this week. Most of you know that we've had 3 members in hospital this week, with serious illnesses, though one is home now. I've been visiting them this week and last, and I'm not breaking any confidences. They have each asked me to let you know how they're doing and thank you for your prayers and ask you to keep praying. I've also had calls this week from other people with serious illness at home, and I know others who are waiting for tests.

And you know what? I'm feeling really sad about this. And I'm feeling angry with God, too. I feel like we've had enough sickness and death and bad news for a while and I want it to stop. I want God to stop it. Fortunately, I just read the book of Job, in which Job basically yells at God (and his friends) for about 20 chapters about all the bad stuff that's been happening to him and then God shows up and calls him righteous. And the psalms are full of complaints against God. So I know God doesn't mind us being angry with him.

Our problem with feeling angry with God is that most of the time when we're angry with someone we want to keep them at a distance. Give them the silent treatment. Hang up the phone. Walk out. It's hard for us to feel love and anger at the same time, though both feelings are there. So we tend to push God away when we need him the most. Fortunately for us, God doesn't go away. If anything, God holds us tighter.

So it's been a rough week, with lots of grief and lots of anger. And I know I'm not the only one feeling these things. And, of course, when we're feeling grief, we tend to feel discouraged as well, which makes it all worse. So I thought I'd talk about these things today, because it's where my heart and mind are, and where I think a lot of your hearts and minds are, too. The question I asked myself was, "When we're feeling this way, what difference does our faith make?"

Well, an easy answer would be that as Christians, we believe this life is not the end, so if someone dies, we will get to see them again, after we, too, die. And that's true. Most of us do believe that there is an afterlife, with God and those we love. And that does give us some comfort. But it doesn't help us that much right now when we're missing someone or anxious about them. What difference does it make here and now?

One thing is that we have company. And I don't just mean that God is with us, either, though that's also true. I mean the community of the church is with us. People in church have been praying for our friends, visiting, signing cards, sending flowers, phoning. Every time I go to see one of them in hospital, they tell me who else has visited, who has called, show me the cards they've received. And they are so grateful for our prayers.

Have you ever gone through a really rough time and had people praying for you? Charles and I did, back in 1999. I won't go into the details but it was a very hard time, very challenging and it shook all our foundations. Thankfully, people were praying for us all year. Lots of people. And we could feel it. Have you ever experienced that? Felt the prayers? We felt upheld by that. When the crisis was over and a lot of the prayers stopped, we could feel that, too. This is why I tail off prayers gradually when someone is better, so they aren't let down with a bump. It made a huge difference to know we weren't alone, that we had loving support from so many people. Sometimes we can only feel God's love through people

We also had people who were willing to listen and just be there for us. Church people. It's such a relief to be able to talk about things with someone you know loves you. Or just go for a walk with them. Our family was far away. But church people were close at hand and were there for us. I know that any time I've been carrying heavy burdens, just telling someone about it and having them listen has made so much difference. I'm not looking to them to solve the problem. Just to be there and to listen. And it's been in the church that I've found those people. That's one difference faith makes.

At an even deeper level, one of the things I've learned over my lifetime is that I tend to grow the most from the difficult things in life. When things are peachy keen, I don't tend to do much growing. I suspect this is because I don't spend nearly as much time in prayer when everything's great. And I'm too busy relaxing and enjoying it to want to look at deeper lessons and opportunities for growth.

But when bad things happen, well, then I pray a LOT and I do look for what possible good could be found in this whole thing. And that's something I've found that God does. God regularly takes bad things and transforms them so that good can come of them. Or transforms us, perhaps, so we can accept the good that's there.

It is in the suffering of my life that I have learned empathy and compassion. If I had never suffered myself, I can't imagine that I would be able to feel any empathy for those who were suffering, much less cut them any slack. It's like when you're feeling sick and some cheery person says, "I never get sick!" And of course you feel like coughing on them. Or worse. What you want is someone who understands what it's like and is willing to be there with you. And I find that it is in my own suffering that I have found the strength to be able to do that. And that's a gift of God. Not the suffering itself, but the strength.

When we offer our sadness and anger and anything else we're feeling to God, God takes it in his loving hands and holds it like a treasure. And breathes the Spirit onto it and watches it transform. Not that our anger goes away or the sadness goes away. It doesn't. It just works in us in a wholesome, healing way. Anger can lead to good action. It was anger that led Martin Luther King, Jr. to take action to end discrimination against black people. He channelled his anger into non-violent direct action. It gave him the strength and courage to do that. It is sadness that allows us to truly be with people who are sad, to be with them and not to run away or try to shut them up or just say a lot of platitudes. Sadness is a wonderfully bonding emotion.

God has a talent for turning sow's ears into silk purses. This doesn't mean they didn't start out as a sow's ear. This doesn't mean we want those sow's ears in our lives. But everyone gets them. Everyone gets bad stuff in their lives because we are human and it's part of human life. We can choose what to do with those things. And better, when we get them, to offer them to God and let God transform them, rather than letting them fester into bitterness. Another benefit of faith.

At this point in my life, if someone offered me a chance to remove all the sadness, suffering, injustice, grief and so on from my past, all the bad stuff, and just keep the good stuff, I wouldn't accept the offer. Because those things have been offered to God and God has used them to grow compassion and caring and love in me. God has used them to help me not to judge people, but to accept them as they are, to see the good and bad in every person without turning away from them. At least, God's working on those things! Wouldn't say I've totally arrived yet. And those things are too valuable to me to want to lose them.

Human lives just are full of suffering, because we are mortal. Because we are able to love, suffering inevitably comes when someone we love is sick or dies. We can't avoid this except by not loving, and that is a much too high price to pay.

So yes, this has been a difficult week, for many of us, and I expect the next few weeks will also be difficult as we get a clearer sense of how everyone's doing and what to expect. But because we are people of faith, we won't be tackling those things alone. We will be doing it together with this very loving community. Because we are people of faith, we will be taking it all to God, whether in anger or sadness or love or gratitude doesn't matter. God has room in his heart for all those things. And because we are people of faith and because we remain with God even when we're angry with him, God will be able to help us to find the gifts in those things. Apart from anything else, we'll be drawn even closer together in love. We'll realise how much we care about each other, we'll forget about petty annoyances, we'll

do kind things for one another. And if that's so, all the other things Jesus and Paul were talking about today will take care of themselves. God bless us all.