

Meeting in That Place of Pain
Healing Sunday, January 21, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

I was having a beer with our good friend, Rabbi Ken Chasen of Leo Baeck Temple this week. Ken has become an even closer friend since the Hamas massacre of October 7 and the ongoing massacres of Palestinians in Gaza since then.

But that's not what we were talking about last Wednesday night. We were talking about our parents.

You see, Ken's mother died a month or so ago, and, as many of you know, my father died last March, and my mom died a few years before that. And we were talking about grief and healing.

We had both experienced the grace and love of our respective communities in the wake of our parent's deaths. So many of you showed up – people who barely knew my dad or knew him not at all -- on a Saturday morning in March to be with my family and me as we mourned and remembered.

For Ken, the people of Leo Baeck sat shiva with the family over a weekend, surrounding them with love ... and just wild amounts of food. When I went to sit shiva with them, they welcomed me as a fellow friend and mourner. Again ... grace and love were overflowing.

But then something happened. Something that is not about All Saints Church and Leo Baeck Temple but about the difference between Judaism and American Christianity.

You see, in Judaism, the funeral is just the beginning of the mourning. There is the seven day period of *Shiva*. Then there is the first month of mourning, *Shloshim*, where mourners go on with their lives but they make some changes to acknowledge that they are in mourning. If your parent has died, the mourning of shloshim is supposed to go on for an entire year and the whole community acknowledges it.

There is a special prayer, the mourner's *kadish*, which is said daily for 11 months ... and most communities include this in the shabbat services so the whole community can continue to acknowledge the grief.

When we have suffered loss, we learn to live with it but we never forget. Healing is not the absence of pain and grief but it is the companionship of the community in love, the embracing of grief and the refusal to put a timetable on it that allows Jews to not only say “may their memory be a blessing” but to love one another into that becoming reality.

As American Christians, particularly in Eurocentric traditions like the American Episcopal Church, we deal with this differently and in a distinctly, dare I say, British way.

For the two and a half years after my mom’s death I would regularly try to engage my British dad in conversation about her. You know, subtle things like “I’m really missing mom today. Do you have days like that?” to which he replied what has become our family mantra of denial “yes ... but we mustn’t dwell on those things.”

There should be no doubt of the British roots of the Episcopal Church. Someday comedian John Mulaney will probably be canonized as an Anglican pastoral theologian for describing his Irish upbringing as ‘I’ll keep all my emotions right here ... and then I’ll die.’

In seminary it was ground into me that our memorial services are services not of death but of resurrection. We give lip service to comforting those who mourn but we give precious little space to it ... and our own keep calm and carry on extends to an unofficial “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy about grief and loss. It’s OK to grieve, but don’t let it impact your work or social relationships.

Yes, we’ve got a grief group or counseling if you really need it ... but we siloize and marginalize those resources so much, we often feel like there’s something extra wrong with us if we use them.

And it’s not just about grieving death. It’s the wounds that come from every kind of loss or even threat of loss.

I learned well from my father. The times I have been able to cry since his death I can count on the fingers of one hand. And when I start, something in me usually shuts it down in less than a minute.

And yet one of those times was right in this space. It was this past April, and we had the second part of our annual meeting after church. And when it was over, Keith Holeman screened a rough

cut of a film he is working on about how All Saints Church got through COVID. Some of you might remember it. It was 30 minutes long and only got through 2020.

About three minutes into it, the tears started to come, and I couldn't stop them. The film took me back to those days and how exhausting they were, how hard they were, how scary they were for all of us. The film was frankly more about triumph and perseverance than the loss but just revisiting that time brought it all back. I could feel it in my body. And I knew that all the trauma, the loss, the fear, the exhaustion from the pandemic was still there.

And because grief touches grief, fear touches fear, pain touches pain and exhaustion touches exhaustion ... as I felt again the bottled up experience of the pandemic it tapped down into even deeper feelings of loss, pain and exhaustion.

When the film ended, I wiped my eyes and looked around ... and just about every person in the church was wiping their eyes. And as I walked through the community several of you came up to me and shared your stories of pain, loss and exhaustion that were attached to the pandemic ... stories you hadn't shared before because until that moment it wasn't that you weren't aware of the pain or in touch with it ... just something in us hadn't felt safe because we hadn't created the space to feel it together and not be afraid of it.

And yet we haven't followed up on that experience ... and we need to. It's perhaps the most important thing for us to do. Because when we don't expose our wounds to the light and love of the community, they actually don't go away, they fester.

Our wounds turn into deep pain, and they impact our health and the way we treat each other and ourselves.

Our pain can find its way into rage spilled into an email or talking about people behind their back, into lashing out at one another to match how we feel the pain and loss silently lashing out at us inside.

Our wounds turn into deep pain, and you would think that would be enough incentive for us to seek healing, except because we live in a church and world where "we mustn't dwell on these things" is given Gospel status too often we bury the pain even more deeply.

We are the synagogue which Jesus visits in this morning's Gospel. Where someone who has the courage to actually show their wound to the community receives not instant admiration,

compassion and healing but instead a debate about “hmmm ... is that really appropriate.” ... and in fact believing that healing in the midst of the community gathering was completely inappropriate, prepared to prosecute Jesus if he responded in love.

And when he did, our scripture tells us “the Pharisees went out with the Herodians and immediately began to conspire against Jesus, how they might destroy him.”

And really, who can be surprised? Because if the church becomes a place of healing, then it also becomes a place where our wounds are exposed. And that can be frightening if the voices inside us that tell us our wounds are weakness, if the voices inside us tell us that “everyone else would have gotten over this by now, something is wrong with me and I can’t let people know,” if the voices inside us tell us we actually can just avoid the pain if we heed the Gospel of “we mustn’t dwell on these things.”

And yet ... if we are not a place of healing, the church has no real purpose. And we cannot pretend to heal the world if we do not at the same time offer our own wounds up for healing.

And that takes courage.

I often say when I’m doing the greetings that if you are coming into church ... either in person or online ... after an experience of being wounded by the church ... or having the church ignore your wounds ... the first words we need to say to you are “thank you.”

Thank you for your courage.

Thank you for being willing to try to find healing again even after being hurt and disappointed before.

Thank you for reminding the rest of us that the church is supposed to be a place of healing and not of wounding.

And ... those words of thanks, though necessary and appropriate, are not enough.

If we are truly to be a different community. A community of radical inclusion, courageous justice, joyful spirituality and ethical stewardship we have to embrace the opportunity that our primary call is to be a community of healing. A community where we provide space and support for one another to acknowledge our wounds, to grieve our losses, to feel our pain and

to acknowledge our powerlessness to make it all better just by jamming it down or trying to drown it.

Madelene L'Engle once told a story of a friend who was doing a cross-country drive -- this was before cell phones -- and she asked this friend "but what if you get lonely" and her friend, who was in recovery said, "that's OK ... I'll just find a meeting." And L'Engle -- who was an Episcopalian -- mused "I wonder what would happen if I wandered into a strange Episcopal Church and just said 'I'm lonely.'" What would people's response be?

It's not that people who go to Episcopal or other church's are less compassionate than people who go to 12-step meetings ... many, in fact, are the same people. It's that too often our churches ... yes, even this one ... mimic a toxic, addictive, wound-denying culture rather than step out in healing courage to transform it.

Another dear friend of ours here at All Saints, Rabbi Sharon Brous of IKAR, was interviewed by the New York Times' Ezra Klein recently ... and I want to read you something she said because it's an image that has stuck with me ever since.

Here is what Sharon said:

"So there is a Mishnah, an ancient rabbinic text in the code of law that was codified 2,000 years ago, that tells the story of what would happen when the people used to go up to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. And imagine Mecca, like hundreds of thousands of people coming at once on a kind of sacred pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They would ascend the steps to the Temple Mount, and then they would go through this arched entryway. And they would turn to the right, and they would circle around the perimeter of this courtyard.

"And then they would exit essentially right where they had come in. Except, the Mishnah says, for someone who's broken hearted. That person would go up to Jerusalem. They would ascend the steps, walk through the arched entryway, but they would turn to the left. And every single person who would pass them coming from the right would have to stop and ask this simple question "What happened to you?" And then the person would say, I'm brokenhearted. My loved one just died. I'm worried sick about my kid. I found a lump.

"And the people who are walking from right to left would have to stop and offer a blessing before they could continue on their pilgrimage. And I just want to think about how profound the insight is in this ancient ritual because if you spend your whole life dreaming of going up on this sacred pilgrimage to the holiest site, the holiest place on the holiest days, and doing your circle around the courtyard, the last thing in the world you want to do is stop and ask the poor guy who's coming toward you, are you OK? What's your story? What's going on with you?"

“And yet central to your religious obligation, in fact, the only religious obligation you have that day, is precisely to see this other person in their suffering, to ask them what their story is, and then to give them a blessing. And if you’re broken, shattered, the last thing you want to do is show up in this space with all of these people and go against the current in such a public and visible way. And yet, you’re obligated to do that.”

That’s what today is about. And frankly, maybe that’s what every Sunday needs to be about. In a minute you’ll have the opportunity to come to the front and be asked the question “what happened to you” and to receive laying on of hands and prayer and anointing for healing. And it is a wonderful thing and I encourage all of you to, in any way you can bring yourself to, to come forward and do this. I really don’t care how long it takes ... can we let the tyranny of the clock take a vacation just this once?

We are in an extended period of deep change and loss. We are supposed to be feeling it and that means it’s not only OK to feel it, it’s important to feel it and to feel it together.

It’s not just the pandemic. It’s retirement, cancer, death, job loss, divorce, suicide, mental illness children in crisis ... not to mention just the existential fear of a planet that feels more unpredictable and less safe ever passing day.

And in a church culture of “we mustn’t dwell on these things” is it any wonder that the number of angry emails has gone up, and the cries for “can’t we just go back to the way things were” have gotten louder and our capacity to embrace change has diminished.

We are in an extended period of difficult change and deep loss. And it impacts all of us. So let me be the first to say it this morning. I am hurting. It has been a hard seven and a half years here and the past four especially so.

I am hurting and I know you are too, I just know it. So instead of trying to pretend we aren’t in pain, can we meet in that place of pain?

Can we meet in that place and admit we don’t have all the answers, that as Chase likes to say, that we are all “a hot mess on a good day?”

Can we hold each other in grace instead of lashing out at each other in fear?

Can we be honest about how hard this is right now and come before God holding hands and try to trust that in God's love is the healing we crave?

The man with the withered hand knew that the first step in healing is showing your wound.

The people on pilgrimage at the temple knew there was no holier question than "what happened to you?" and no greater obligation than being the blessing in the midst of the pain.

I'm hurting. How about you?

Amen.