

## **17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

Psalm 23 (Nan C. Merrill - Psalms for Praying) (RBG Rabbi)

O my Beloved, you are my shepherd,  
I shall not want;  
You bring me to green pastures for rest  
and lead me beside still waters  
renewing my spirit,  
You restore my soul.  
You lead me in the path of goodness  
to follow Love's way.  
Even though I walk through the  
valley of the shadow and of death,  
I am not afraid;  
For You are ever with me;  
Your rod and Your staff,  
they guide me,  
they give me strength and comfort.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of all my fears;  
you bless me with oil,  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy will  
follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the heart  
of the Beloved  
forever.

A week of grief. Many of us shocked and saddened at the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

Some of us are experiencing the grief of watching the slow, agonizing death of decency and honor, morals and compassion, honest and truth in our country, wondering if our democracy is also dying alongside those values.

And then there is the staggering number of deaths due to the COVID virus - over 200,000 in our nation alone, with close to 994,000 worldwide, and the numbers keep increasing.

Many of us are grieving the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many other beautiful souls who have died violent deaths and with their deaths, the death of the dream of "liberty and justice for all". Black Lives Matter and I grieve for the lives lost to violence and gun violence in our nation.

As a minister, I have been around death and the accompanying grief people feel in many situations. I have felt myself in the deaths of my in-laws, Sam

and Bess, and my father, Jim, and most recently this year, my mother, Elizabeth.

There is so much we are grieving personally and as a community. The grief is real for each of us and all of us.

In his book, "A Grief Observed" author C.S. Lewis, says of grief: **"We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination."**

John Irving, writing in his novel, "A Prayer for Owen Meany" writes these words about grief:

**"When someone you love dies, and you're not expecting it, you don't lose her all at once; you lose her in pieces over a long time—the way the mail stops coming, and her scent fades from the pillows and even from the clothes in her closet and drawers. Gradually, you accumulate the parts of her that are gone. Just when the day comes—when there's a particular missing part that overwhelms you with the feeling that she's gone, forever—there comes another day, and another specifically missing part."**

"Comfort, Comfort, my people says the Lord..."

I want to share two stories with you about a grief observed on my part. Both took place when I was in seminary, studying to become a minister.

The first was while I was serving as a student minister, shadowing Rev. Ben Lenhart at the Newburgh Presbyterian Church. He was making a pastoral call on one of our older members, a woman who had been widowed years earlier. His visit though, was not about her grief over the death of her spouse. She had called and asked Ben if he could stop by because her cat had died. Seriously? I grew up in the country. We had cats and dogs as pets. They lived and died, and for me, as sad as it was, I moved on. There was always another cat or dog to take the last ones place. So this was something new. Ben shared with me the real grief people feel when their companion animal dies and as pastors, we are to offer comfort to them, because pets offer a loving presence to individuals who live alone or with families who see them as another member of the household.

Ben's words helped me understand my next encounter with a grief observed, this one more personal. My sister, Beth, received from her then boyfriend, Howard, a little black poodle puppy. She named him Mikey. While Mikey was my sister's dog, he became my dad's constant companion, going every where with him - to church, on visits to parishioners, to the office, and into town. Mikey was often perched up on my dad's shoulder as he drove. My dad loved

Mikey in a way he had never loved another of our dogs. We lived in the country. One day, I was home from seminary. My dad with Mikey following at his side, had been picking up some trash along the road. Mom and I were in the house when dad came in carrying Mikey's lifeless body. He had been hit and killed. My dad was sobbing uncontrollably. Seeing my dad's grief visible in his tears and loud sobs, made me think of Ben's words about the grief people feel at the death of beloved pet.

Some of you out there understand and can empathize with me through these stories. Many of you have reached out to Staci, Sam and I as we shared that yesterday, we observed our own grief when we had to make the difficult and painful decision to euthanize our dog, Shadow. The grief is real.

The poet, Mary Oliver, who offered us so much in observing the world around us, including through the eyes of her beloved dogs, Percy and Luke, writes:

Dogs die so soon. I have my stories of that grief, no doubt many of you do also. It is almost a failure of will, a failure of love, to let them grow old — or so it feels. We would do anything to keep them with us, and to keep them young. The one gift we cannot give.

Because of the dog's joyfulness, our own is increased. It is no small gift. It is not the least reason why we should honor as well as love the dog of our own life, and the dog down the street, and all the dogs not yet born. What would the world be like without music or rivers or the green and tender grass? What would this world be like without dogs?

LUKE - Mary Oliver

I had a dog  
who loved flowers.  
Briskly she went  
through the fields,  
yet paused  
for the honeysuckle  
or the rose,  
her dark head  
and her wet nose  
touching  
the face  
of every one  
with its petals  
of silk,  
with its fragrance  
rising  
into the air  
where the bees,

their bodies  
    heavy with pollen,  
hovered—  
    and easily  
    she adored  
    every blossom,  
not in the serious,  
    careful way  
    that we choose  
    this blossom or that blossom—  
the way we praise or don't praise—  
    the way we love  
    or don't love—  
    but the way  
we long to be—  
    that happy  
    in the heaven of earth—  
    that wild, that loving.

In 2020, we have all lost so much from loved one to beloved pets to our former ways of life. We all have experienced grief in so many different ways as individuals and collectively as schools, communities, states, a nation and the world. Our grief binds us together as death is the great equalizer that makes us human. And in our tears, we weep, we know the One who loved us, giving up all power, to make himself vulnerable to the sufferings and pains we experience as humans, even to the point of death, weeps with us. And we know the promise is that in the end, The Beloved Heart of all our human hearts, makes her home among us, and will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and sorrow, and suffering and pain and death will be no more. For God will make all things new. Amen.

"For Grief" by John O'Donohue, from *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (Doubleday, 2008).

When you lose someone you love,  
Your life becomes strange,  
The ground beneath you gets fragile,  
Your thoughts make your eyes unsure;  
And some dead echo drags your voice down  
Where words have no confidence.  
Your heart has grown heavy with loss;  
And though this loss has wounded others too,  
No one knows what has been taken from you  
When the silence of absence deepens.

Flickers of guilt kindle regret  
For all that was left unsaid or undone.

There are days when you wake up happy;  
Again inside the fullness of life,  
Until the moment breaks  
And you are thrown back  
Onto the black tide of loss.  
Days when you have your heart back,  
You are able to function well  
Until in the middle of work or encounter,  
Suddenly with no warning,  
You are ambushed by grief.  
It becomes hard to trust yourself.  
All you can depend on now is that  
Sorrow will remain faithful to itself.  
More than you, it knows its way  
And will find the right time  
To pull and pull the rope of grief  
Until that coiled hill of tears  
Has reduced to its last drop.  
Gradually, you will learn acquaintance  
With the invisible form of your departed;  
And, when the work of grief is done,  
The wound of loss will heal  
And you will have learned  
To wean your eyes  
From that gap in the air  
And be able to enter the hearth  
In your soul where your loved one  
Has awaited your return  
All the time.

#### THE SWEETNESS OF DOGS (Mary Oliver - adapted)

What do you say, Shadow? I am thinking  
of sitting out in the meadow to watch  
the sunset. It's colorful tonight.  
So we go  
and the sun sets, so beautiful it  
makes me shudder, makes me think about  
time and space, makes me take  
measure of myself: one iota  
pondering heaven. Thus we sit, myself  
thinking how grateful I am for the sunset's  
perfect beauty and also, oh! how rich  
it is to love the world. Shadow, meanwhile,  
leans against me and gazes up  
into my face. As though I were just as wonderful  
as the perfect sunset.