



**ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY
NOVEMBER 4, 2019
WHERE'S THE CLOSURE?**

JOHN 11: 32-44

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "By this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

SERMON

CLOSURE.

I'VE COME TO DISLIKE THIS WORD. CLOSURE. IT'S ONE OF THOSE POP PSYCHOLOGY WORDS, A CREEPING CLICHE WITH PURPORTED PROFOUND MEANING.



FAMILIES USE IT WHEN THE MAN WHO RAPED AND MURDERED THEIR LITTLE GIRL IS SENTENCED TO PRISON.

WE NOW HAVE CLOSURE.

REALLY?

WHEN THE BODY OF AN ABUSED LOVED ONE, DISCARDED AS SO MUCH TRASH, FINALLY IS DISCOVERED. CLOSURE.

ARE YOU SURE?

WHEN OUR GRANDMOTHER, GRANDFATHER, MOTHER, OR FATHER, FINALLY PASSES AFTER LYING IN BED LIKE A SKELETON FOR TEN YEARS FROM CANCER OR ALZHEIMER'S.

RELIEF, PERHAPS, BUT CLOSURE?

I WORKED WITH THREE CLIENTS WHO EVENTUALLY DIED WITH ALS, LOU GEHRIG'S DISEASE. TWO STARTED OUT IN MY OFFICE ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF OUR HOUSE. THEN WHEN THEY COULD NOT MAKE IT UP THE STAIRS, WE MOVED TO OUR LIVING ROOM. THEN, WHEN THEY COULD NOT WALK THE FEW STEPS TO OUR FRONT DOOR, WE MET IN CHAIRS ON THE CONCRETE PAD IN FRONT OF OUR GARAGE. THEN I SAT BY THE SIDE OF THEIR CAR WHEN THEY COULDN'T GET OUT OF THEIR CAR ANY LONGER. UNTIL THEY COULD SPEAK NO LONGER.

CLOSURE?

MY SISTER IN GERMANY, EMAILED ME IN OCTOBER ON THE 31ST ANNIVERSARY OF OUR FATHER'S SUICIDE. AND WE WROTE BACK AND FORTH.

HOW DO WE MEASURE WHATEVER CLOSURE EXISTS AFTER 31 YEARS?

THOSE KILLED AT TREE OF LIFE, THEIR FAMILIES, THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF SQUIRREL HILL, ALL OF PITTSBURGH, JEWS THROUGHOUT THIS COUNTRY AND THE WORLD.

DO THEY AND WE HAVE CLOSURE?

WHAT ABOUT NANCY GALBRAITH'S ABRUPT RESIGNATION AS ORGANIST AND CHOIR DIRECTOR? EVEN THOUGH, BY GOD'S GRACE AND THE MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WE FOUND HER REPLACEMENT, IT IS ALSO A DEATH OF SORTS. A DEATH OF HER PRESENCE EACH SUNDAY, THE LOSS OF RELATIONSHIP, THE LOSS OF HER MUSICAL LEADERSHIP, THE LOSS OF OUR *HEART AND SOUL* WORSHIP SERVICE, AND YET ANOTHER DISRUPTION IN THE LIFE OF OUR FAITH COMMUNITY.

CLOSURE? IN THIS CASE, WE MOVE FORWARD AS BEST WE CAN.

ALL THESE EXPERIENCES ARE OUTSIDE OUR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE CONTROL.

HOW DO WE KEEP OUR HEARTS OPEN IN THE FACE OF THE VARIOUS DEATHS WE EXPERIENCE IN LIFE?

BY BEING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST, CHILDREN OF GOD, WHO FACE THE TOUGH REALITIES OF LIFE WITH GRACE AND FAITH.

LUTHER, SELDOM THE OPTIMIST, WRITES, "IN THE MIDST OF LIFE, WE ARE IN DEATH. DISASTERS, WRETCHEDNESS, SHORTNESS OF LIFE, THE PANGS OF AN AFFLICTED CONSCIENCE, TEMPORAL DEATH, ETERNAL DEATH, DEATH."



THE UNFAITHFUL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO **NOT** FACING THE EVERYDAY REALITIES OF LOSS AND DEATH WITH GRACE AND FAITH IS BY SHAMING AND BLAMING. **DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES AND DYSFUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS THRIVE ON BLAME AND SHAME.**

BLAMERS AND SHAMERS INSIST SOMEONE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE LOSS OR THE DEATH. THEY CLAIM: IF SOMEBODY HAD DONE SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY, THIS WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED.

IF SHE HAD ONLY GONE TO THE DOCTOR SOONER, SHE WOULDN'T HAVE DIED.

NOTHING LIKE BLAMING THE DEAD PERSON.

IF ONLY WE WOULDN'T HAVE LET HER GET HER OWN APARTMENT, SHE WOULDN'T HAVE RUN INTO THAT DERANGED MAN WHO ATTACKED HER.

NOTHING LIKE BLAMING YOURSELF.

SOMEONE SHOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING, OR SHOULD NOT SAID SOMETHING, OR DONE SOMETHING, OR NOT DONE SOMETHING OR NANCY WOULDN'T HAVE RESIGNED.

NOTHING LIKE HOLDING SOMEONE ELSE RESPONSIBLE FOR A PERSON'S ADULT DECISION.

THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT IS "DON'T SHOULD ON YOURSELF...."

IN THIS REGARD, THE SUICIDE OF MY FATHER WAS MY GREATEST AND WISEST TEACHER. WHEN HE SHOT HIMSELF IN THE HEAD WITH A HANDGUN, I RACKED MY BRAIN.

WHAT COULD I HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

SHOULD I HAVE SAID THIS? DONE THAT? NOT SAID THIS? NOT DONE THAT?

DIDN'T HE LOVE ME, MY SISTER, HIS GRANDCHILDREN ENOUGH TO STAY AROUND?

WEREN'T WE LOVABLE ENOUGH?

I COULD HAVE DRIVEN MYSELF CRAZIER THAN I AM.

AS ODD AS IT MIGHT SEEM, I THINK IT IS HARD FOR US TO ACCEPT THAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ONLY OUR OWN LIFE.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM IS MEANT TO TEACH US THIS. THE PASTOR TAKES THE BABY FROM THE PARENTS INTO HIS OR HER ARMS AS A VISIBLE STATEMENT THAT EACH CHILD IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A CHILD OF GOD, WITH HIS OR HER OWN ULTIMATE DESTINY, FATE, AND PATH IN LIFE.

BUT, BOY, CAN WE BE RAGING CO-DEPENDENTS.

CO-DEPENDENCY IS WHERE WE THINK AND FEEL RESPONSIBLE FOR OTHER PEOPLE—THEIR FEELINGS, THEIR THOUGHTS, THEIR ACTIONS, THEIR WANTS, THEIR NEEDS, THEIR WELL-BEING, THEIR LACK OF WELL-BEING, AND THEIR ULTIMATE DESTINY.

IT WOULD BE AS IF AT BAPTISM, THE PARENTS GRABBED THE BABY RIGHT BACK OUT OF GOD'S HANDS AND SAID, "NO, I'LL TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY. AND IF IT DOESN'T TURN OUT WELL, IT'S ALL MY FAULT."

MANY CHURCH MEMBERS CAN BE INCREDIBLY CO-DEPENDENT AND IT HURTS THEM, THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR CONGREGATIONS.

THAT'S WHY THE TWELVE-STEP PROGRAMS IN THE CHURCH BASEMENT ARE OFTEN HEALTHIER THAN THE PEOPLE UPSTAIRS. TWELVE-STEPPERS DO NOT TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE ANOTHER IN CO-DEPENDENT WAYS.



IN FACT, DOING SO IS CONSIDERED A WAY TO HURT A PERSON RATHER THAN HELP.

IT'S LIKE THAT CLASSIC INTERPLAY WHEN SOMEONE SAYS TO YOU, "YOU MADE ME SO ANGRY."
NO. I'LL OWN MY ACTION AND YOU OWN YOUR RESPONSE TO MY ACTION.
YOU CHOSE TO RESPOND WITH ANGER. THAT'S ON YOU.
YOU COULD HAVE BEEN THOUGHTFUL. YOU COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO TALK WITH ME. YOU MIGHT
HAVE CONSIDERED WHETHER YOU ARE OVER-REACTING OR GETTING TOUCHED IN A VULNERABLE
EMOTIONAL PLACE.
YOU MIGHT CONSIDER WHETHER YOU MISHEARD OR MISUNDERSTOOD ME.
WE DON'T MAKE ANYBODY FEEL OR DO ANYTHING.

IF WE HAD THAT KIND OF POWER OVER EACH OTHER, WE WOULD BE GOD....

WHEN I GOT BACK INTO MY RIGHT MIND, I REALIZED I HAD NO POWER OVER MY FATHER'S CHOICE TO
SIT WITH A BOTTLE OF GIN AND DRINK UNTIL HE WAS BLIND DRUNK.

I HAD NO CHOICE OVER HIM PHONING HIS NEIGHBOR, ASKING HER TO CALL ME TO TELL ME HE WAS
GOING TO KILL HIMSELF. THAT WAS SADISTIC ON HIS PART.

AND I HAD NO CHOICE WHEN, ELEVEN HUNDRED MILES AWAY, HE PULLED THE TRIGGER WHILE HIS
NEIGHBOR AND I WERE STILL ON THE PHONE.

WE ALL LIVE AND DIE AS WE LIVE AND DIE. OUR CHOICES MAKE US WHO WE ARE. LIKE THE OLD
CARNEYS USED TO SAY, "YOU PAYS YOUR MONEY AND YOU MAKES YOUR CHOICE...."

ONE OF THE REASONS I STILL LOVE WORKING AS A PASTORAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST IS REFLECTED IN THE
SAYING BY ONE OF THE GREAT PSYCHOLOGICAL MINDS, "PSYCHOTHERAPY IS THE PRACTICE OF
TURNING GHOSTS INTO ANCESTORS."

SO, IT IS NOT BY CHANCE THAT THE CHURCH'S CELEBRATION OF ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY ALWAYS FALLS
SHORTLY AFTER ALL HALLOWS EVE.

WE CERTAINLY CAN BE AND OFTEN ARE HAUNTED BY OUR LOSSES AND THE DEATHS THAT PILE UP AS
WE AGE.

LIFE IS NOT FAIR. NOT ALL LOSSES HEAL QUICKLY. ALL DEATHS ARE NOT PEACEFUL ONES IN SLEEP.
NONE OF OUR LOVED ONES WHO HAVE PASSED ARE WITHOUT THEIR FLAWS, WEAKNESSES, AND
CHOICES THAT HAVE HURT US.

IT TAKES SPIRITUAL MATURITY TO STAY OUT OF BLAME AND SHAME. BLAMING AND SHAMING ARE
SINS OF THE FLESH, SINS OF THE OLD PERSON, AS SAINT PAUL WOULD SAY. IF WE STILL BLAME AND
SHAME OTHERS, THEN WE HAVE SOME GROWING UP TO DO IN CHRIST.



AND SO, WE WORK TO DEVELOP THE FRUITS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, LONG-SUFFERING, GENTLENESS AND FAITH.

NOT WHEN ALL IS GOING WELL. BUT, AS LUTHER SAYS, WHEN "IN THE MIDST OF LIFE, WE ARE IN DEATH...."

AS I TYPED UP YOUR PRAYERS FOR YOUR LOVED ONES THIS WEEK, IT FELT LIKE WALKING ON HOLY GROUND. IT FELT AS THOUGH YOU HAD TRUSTED ME WITH YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR SACRED MEMORIES.

THERE WAS SUCH LOVE IN YOUR WORDS. AND LOSS. SACRED MEMORIES. GHOSTS WHO HAD BECOME ANCESTORS. THOSE WHO DID AND CONTINUE TO FEED YOUR SOULS.

NO BLAME. NO SHAME. JUST ACCEPTANCE OF WHAT LIFE HAD BOTH GIVEN AND TAKEN AWAY....

OVER THE YEARS, I HAVE PLACED GREAT VALUE ON MY DREAMS, FOLLOWING ST. AUGUSTINE WHO DECLARED THAT, OTHER THAN SCRIPTURE, DREAMS ARE THE PRIMARY WAY GOD SPEAKS TO US. FOLLOWING SIGMUND FREUD AND CARL JUNG, WHO PLACED DREAMS AT THE CENTER OF "THE TALKING CURE."

IN MY MIDDLE YEARS, I HAD A SERIES OF THREE DREAMS, ALL DEALING WITH DEATH AND RESURRECTION.

I SHARE ONE OF THESE DREAMS, HOPING THAT IT OFFERS HOPE AND COMFORT AS WE ALL FACE THE LOSS AND DEATH OF OUR LOVED ONES THIS MORNING; AS WE ONE DAY WILL FACE OUR OWN DEATH....

I AM STANDING AT THE CENTER OF A LOVELY ONE-ROOM LOG CABIN. I LOOK OUT THE PICTURE WINDOW AND SEE A BEAUTIFUL LAKE AT THE FOOT OF A SMALL MOUNTAIN COVERED IN STARTLING GREEN FOLIAGE.

AROUND THE LAKE THERE IS WHAT LOOKS LIKE A LARGE, CHURCH PICNIC. TABLES GROANING WITH FOOD. PARENTS PLAYING BALL WITH THEIR CHILDREN. OTHER CHILDREN PLAYING TAG. PEOPLE CONVERSING IN LAWN CHAIRS. COUPLES WALKING HAND-IN-HAND.

THE SUN IS SHINING OVER A LOVELY, COOL SPRING DAY.

SUDDENLY, THE MOUNTAIN IS NOT A MOUNTAIN, BUT A VOLCANO. THE PEOPLE DISAPPEAR AND I AM STANDING ALONE IN THE CENTER OF THE CABIN, UNABLE TO MOVE.



I STAND, ROOTED IN PLACE, AS LAVA ERUPTS AND FLOWS HOT DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, ENGULFING TREES IN FLAMES. I WATCH AS THE LAVA SPILLS OVER THE ROOF OF THE CABIN, POURS, STEAMING, INTO THE CABIN, AND COMPLETELY COVERS ME.

MY CONSCIOUSNESS DISAPPEARS FOR A MOMENT AND ALL IS NOTHING, BLANK, BLACK. SOMEHOW, I AM AWARE OF THE NOTHING, THE BLANK, THE DARKNESS.

AND THEN.

I AM ALIVE, STANDING IN THE CENTER OF CABIN. UNHARMED. AS I WAS BEFORE DEATH.

THREE DREAMS DELIVERED THE SAME TRUTH. DEATH IS BUT A BRIEF MOMENT WHEN, EVEN IN THAT MOMENT, THERE IS AWARENESS OF THE NOTHING, THE VOID, AND THEN WE ARE ALIVE AGAIN....

“I SAW A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH. AND I SAW THE HOLY CITY, THE NEW JERUSALEM COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN FROM GOD. AND I HEARD A LOUD VOICE SAY, “SEE, THE HOME OF GOD IS WITH MORTALS. HE WILL DWELL WITH THEM AS THEIR GOD; THEY WILL BE HIS PEOPLES, AND GOD HIMSELF WILL BE WITH THEM; HE WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES. DEATH WILL BE NO MORE; MOURNING AND CRYING AND PAIN WILL BE NO MORE; FOR THE FIRST THINGS HAVE PASSED AWAY.”

AND THE ONE WHO WAS SEATED ON THE THRONE SAID, “SEE, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW.”

SERMON SONG

SONG: **ELEPHANT** BY JASON ISBELL