

Southminster Presbyterian Church 6/20/10

2 Samuel 12:15-23

Matthew 26:36-39

“Tasks of Grief: Bargaining”

Rev. Joe Ripley

This morning we continue our exploration of the tasks we work through when we experience a significant loss or a death. Those who may have missed our earlier discussions can find copies on the church website or on the table outside.

This morning, we will explore the complex and theologically-laden issue of bargaining. Bargaining is conversation with God, therefore, a kind of prayer. Even when we are only talking to ourselves, often we are indirectly speaking to, or asking questions of, God.

In grief, we often bargain with God for a different outcome or result. “God, don’t let it be cancer, and I’ll start spending more time at home. If only there is a mix-up on the tests, I’ll go to church every Sunday. Let my daughter be OK, and give me muscular dystrophy.” Bargaining is also expressed in asking “why” questions: why does this have to happen to a nice person? Why should someone have to suffer so much? Why can’t there be an easier way?

In grief, bargaining is often driven by underlying feelings of guilt. The guilt may be completely appropriate. In other words, someone may have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the painful results with which they are now dealing. It is one of the terrible burdens parents bear concerning their children. We are often left asking, “Should we have done this instead ? Did I let him get away with too much ? I could have been a more involved parent or noticed...” the list is endless.

However, our feelings of guilt may also be completely inappropriate. In other words, we may feel guilt for something for which we bear no legitimate responsibility. Do you know what I talking about ? Someone saying, “It’s all my fault! If only I didn’t like music, then I wouldn’t have started her in dance lessons when she was four, then she wouldn’t have been a cheerleader, and so wouldn’t have been in that bus accident when she was a senior.”

David is bargaining with God. His newborn is deathly ill, and so he fasts, and spends day and night in fervent prayer. He is so ardent in his prayers that his friends are worried about him. David is convinced that his child being ill, is all his fault. Perhaps he is feeling guilty for the circumstances of the child’s conception: the rape of Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband to allow them to be together.

And, we overhear Jesus' prayer to God in the grief anticipating his death, "O God, if it is possible, do not let me face this cup of suffering and pain." These are clues that bargaining is a natural, normal, human response to grief. After all, if God's favorite David and God's own Beloved, Jesus, bargained with God, we should feel OK doing the same thing.

However, before we can explore how we might help someone bargaining with God, we need to think about prayer. Perhaps at another time, we should explore this whole issue of prayer and God's action in the world. But it is easy to recognize that how we understand prayer will tremendously impact how we respond to those bargaining with God.

There are those who believe that if only someone prays earnestly enough, if they are good enough, if they pray the correct prayer or in the correct way or if enough people, or enough of the right people, pray God will intercede and change what has or is about to happen. People who hold such a belief will hear such bargaining as both helpful and faithful.

However, I'm not so sure. I'm afraid such understandings about prayer are a kind of magical thinking that is both unscriptural and potentially damaging to people's faith. It is not surprising then, that I believe in a far different response to someone in grief bargaining with God.

1- Listen non-judgmentally. Perhaps, like David, their theological understanding is magical, unhelpful, or even damaging. Now is not the time for a reasoned theological discussion. Instead, carefully and intentionally listen. Try to summarize what they said, "I think I hear you saying, 'if only I had prayed more, or been a better Christian, or done this or not done that, this wouldn't have happened,' is that what you are feeling?"

Sometimes, hearing spoken clearly what may be disjointed thoughts can lead someone from false hope to a more helpful place of rational reflection and real healing.

2- The second helpful thing we can do, is to recognize and help someone deal with their guilt. Alexander Pope wrote, "To err is human, to forgive divine." How powerfully true. We can help by bringing God's forgiveness to someone struggling with guilt. This is an awesome, and uniquely faith-filled responsibility. We can offer this forgiveness directly, proclaiming God's forgiveness for them, as I did a few moments ago after our prayer of confession. Or, we might suggest, based on our own faith experience and understanding, that God's forgiveness is available to them. Or we ask questions about what they believe God has and can forgive.

This is a place where familiarity with our biblical story is profoundly helpful. The more we know the stories of our faith, the more we can offer them as food for thought for someone struggling with faith issues. Can we think of examples of God's forgiveness ? Adam and Eve's direct disobedience; with Cain's jealousy and resulting murder; with human nature's wickedness after the flood of Noah; with Moses: with the Hebrew people after the golden calf; with David's rape and murder; with the people of faith's continued injustice and turning away from God's ways; with Peter's denial of Jesus; with a father running to meet a prodigal son; with Paul's complicity to the murder of Stephen: the list is inexhaustible. Such stories can often help someone trapped by guilt recognize that since God has already forgiven far worse, God can forgive them, too.

And for inappropriate guilt, that guilt that feels very real and condemning, but is actually irrational or misplaced: we can offer a gentle reality check. Often, our reflective, non-judgmental listening will help someone begin to challenge for themselves these inaccurate feelings of guilt. We can ask, "Is it possible that even though you may be feeling guilty, perhaps this isn't something for which you should feel guilty ?" Or speak for ourselves, "I have accused myself in the past of not doing enough, or knowing enough, but have come to understand this is not only unhelpful, but untrue, do you think this is possible for you ?" We must always remember, that help comes, not in our knowing and claiming God's forgiveness, but in someone else discovering this and feeling God's forgiveness for themselves.

3- The final helpful technique when someone is bargaining in grief, is to recognize the mystery of God. The answer to the question of "Why?" or "Would this have changed the result," is, ultimately a mystery beyond human understanding. Yet, God loves us with an unending love. Nothing can separate us from God's love. Even if we thought we had all of the answers figured out, the only way to know for certain and be able to check if our understanding is correct, comes too late to share with anyone else.

Nice, neat, tightly packaged answers with complete and total clarity do not exist this side of eternity. Living with this ambiguous, uncertainty isn't always immediately comforting. But, it is simply the world in which we exist. The more someone struggling with bargaining is open to the reality of God's love beyond certainty, the more it frees them to move forward toward healing.

Listening, offering God's forgiveness, recognizing the mystery of God's love, can help others work through the process of bargaining and arrive at a healthier, more mature faith understanding. Come back next week, as we continue our exploration of grief, considering the task of anger.