

The Grief for which God has Little Patience

Hespeler, 13 June 2021 © Scott McAndless

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13, Psalm 20, 2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Mark 4:26-34

Our reading this morning from the First Book of Samuel begins with a very powerful statement that seems very apropos to the moment where we find ourselves right now. **“Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul.”**

It is an important statement because it teaches us things about grief that we need to hear right now. We are a people who are generally uncomfortable with expressions of grief, but we do allow that, when somebody dies, people should be permitted to go through a certain time of grief.

Letting People Grieve

And, yes, that is how we often treat it, as if it is something that we are *letting* people do. And we can often get very impatient when people do not process their grief as quickly as we would like them to. I have certainly known people who ask, “How long will you grieve over your loss,” and I know that that can be a very unhelpful and very hurtful question. The fact of the matter is that every person processes grief in their own way and at their own pace and we need to respect that and give them the space to do so.

And that is an important thing to recognize right now because this whole pandemic has certainly brought a lot of grief with it. We have lost too many people to the virus itself and also to secondary effects like cancelled surgeries and an overwhelmed healthcare system. And one of the really hard parts of it has been that people have not been able to mourn these losses as they may really need to. I fear that we may find that people will be carrying the emotional scars of this for a very long time, and we all will need to learn to be very patient with each other as we continue to process the grief of the pandemic for much longer than we might have under ordinary circumstances.

What is Samuel Grieving?

The reference to Samuel’s grief over Saul is an important reminder of something else though. Samuel’s grief is not because of a death. Saul is not dead, and he won’t be dead for some time yet. Saul is also still the king and will continue to be king for some time yet. In fact, there is very little about Saul that has changed. He is still the same man with the same strengths and the same weaknesses that he is always had.

All that has happened is that there has been an incident which has demonstrated that Saul’s weaknesses will prevent him from being the kind of king that he needs to be. We don’t need to go into the incident too much. Basically, Samuel had given Saul some very clear instructions on what he was to do when he went to war and Saul had disregarded those instructions. It is just one incident but it seems to have awakened Samuel to the truth that Saul’s weaknesses will never be overcome.

Grieving the Loss of Illusions

So, what is it, exactly, that Samuel is grieving? All that he has really lost are his own illusions about who Saul is and what he could be. And it is one thing – a very necessary thing – for you to grieve for someone



that you have lost or for another very real loss in your life such as the loss of a supportive community or of something that gave you a sense of identity. It is quite another thing to grieve the loss of your own illusions, but apparently that is what Samuel is doing.

And for me that explains the impatience that God shows Samuel. **“The LORD said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul?’”** I believe that God understands your grief. God’s heart is full of compassion for anyone who has lost a loved one or suffered another significant loss in their life. I don’t believe that God will ever come to you as you struggle with such things and say, “How long will you grieve over this or that loss?”

God is quite willing to walk with you through such a time of grief however long it takes, and we ought to be willing to do as much to the best of our ability for our sisters and brothers. But when what you are grieving is not the actual loss of something or someone dear to you, but rather the loss of illusions and false ideas about yourself or the world, God may not show you the same patience.

Disturbing News from Kamloops

Let’s take an example from current events. At the end of last month, Canada was rocked by a gruesome discovery. Researchers at the former Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia, announced that their surveys had revealed the existence of the remains of 215 children, some as young as three years old, in an unmarked mass grave. And this revelation has indeed unleashed an unprecedented wave of grief across the country both among indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

And of course, this loss is a very real loss. They may have died, some of them, many years ago, but each one of those bodies represents a life cut brutally short and there is every reason to believe that abuse, neglect and malnutrition played a role in many of those deaths. For local indigenous communities, they are also the lives of relatives that they never got to know, even if individuals may never be identified.

Grieving an Evil System

Even more importantly, those 215 bodies are also a very graphic reminder of all the children who died in all of the residential schools across the country which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimated to be between 4000-6000 children. That was a very conservative estimate by the way, as you can tell because they *had* estimated that maybe only 51 had died at the Kamloops school.

And so yes, there is so much to be grieved here and every manifestation of that grief – from the flags at half-mast to the displays of shoes and other memorials – is very fitting and hopefully will bring some healing. And I certainly hope that no one tries to put a timeline on that grief or tell people that they’ve been dwelling on it too long. I believe that God has infinite compassion for those who bear the pain of such a loss as that and so should we.

Our Idea of Canada

But there is another grief that this discovery has stirred as well. For some, this discovery has meant the loss of their idea of what Canada is, the death of their notion that, maybe because Canada did not go about it with the same kind of direct violence that the United States did, that Canada was somehow more noble and less racist in its relationship with indigenous people.

There have been all kinds of indications for a very long time that that idea of Canada was not realistic. If you have been paying attention, for example, to the reports of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* or the report on *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* or if you have been in contact with First Nations people, then this gruesome discovery would not have been a surprise to you. But, of course,

actual dead bodies are a little harder to ignore than so many numbers and statistics. So, yes, some people have been forced to face up to certain truths – a certain dark past and present reality – about a country that they love.

What are we Grieving?

That particular grief is more like Samuel's grief for Saul. The fact of the matter is that nothing has really changed about Canada. It is still the same flawed country that it always was. But we are dealing with the loss of our ideas about that country. And, yes, that *is* a loss, and some people are dealing with it like they would any loss by going through a time of grief. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross taught that people go through five distinct stages of grief after a significant loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

And one way that I know that some Canadians are going through grief over their loss of their idea of Canada is that I see and read evidence of all of these stages. There have been articles trying to deny that things were as bad in the schools as this makes it appear, there have been demonstrations of anger that particularly seek to deflect blame on to some party or the other – the Catholic Church, John A. MacDonald, Egerton Ryerson, even the indigenous communities themselves. There is certainly a lot of bargaining going on and depression as well. Of course, it is also heartening to see people accepting the simple truth that maybe their country is not exactly what they thought it was.

There is definitely a sense in which we are grieving, not only for the loss of 215 children, but also the loss of our illusions about ourselves and our country.

God's Reaction to our Grief

And I think the story of Samuel should remind us that God does not respond to those two different griefs in exactly the same way. Is God sympathetic to our need to grieve over the loss of our illusions about our country? Yes. By all means, we should lament the loss of our innocence and beat our breasts as we come to terms with our failures. But know this, at some point God came to Samuel and said, **“How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out.”**

At some point – and I think that point is very soon – we need to get past dealing with our emotions about all of this and move on to action. We need to fill up our horn with oil and set out to embrace a new and better future. And what, in this case, might filling our horn with oil look like?

Filling our Horn with Oil

I suspect it would include things like moving ahead with a survey of all the residential school properties so that we might have a realistic account of a part of what was lost. I suspect filling our horns with oil might include the federal government dropping its opposition to certain lawsuits very legitimately put forward by survivors of the residential school system.

In fact, there is no lack of actions that can and should be taken as very few of the recommendations of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and the report on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls have actually been implemented. We do have a pretty good idea of what next steps can be and I do think I hear God saying, **“Fill your horn with oil and set out.”**

And, of course, I would like to also remind us of the challenge put forward by our Sunday School kids. The action they have taken is to give \$215 from the funds they have raised to support the work of one of our indigenous ministries in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. They challenge all of us to consider doing

likewise by giving a symbolic donation in support of one of those ministries or in support of some local Indigenous organizations. Between now and Canada Day, let's consider what we can do through our generosity to lay the foundation in practical terms for a better nation. **"Fill your horn with oil and set out."**

Other Examples

Now, I have gone on about one particular example of the kind of grief that Samuel was suffering from because it is a very hot topic at the moment. But before I leave this, I should recognize that there are other times when God reacts in much the same way to our grief over our lost illusions.

There is a similar pattern that is played out, for example, most every time there is a major mass shooting among our good neighbours to the south. The pattern is so repetitive that it has become a cliché. First, all of the people who have any power to do anything about it, send out their thoughts and prayers. This is soon followed by cautions as they say, "People are grieving, this is not the time to have a political discussion." Every time I hear that pattern repeated, it is like I can hear God shouting from heaven, "How long will you give me your thoughts and prayers? **Fill your horn with oil and set out.**"

A lesson for the church

I suspect that the church and many other institutions in our society are also in a very similar moment. The pandemic has and likely will change many things in the institutional life all around us. There are some losses, genuine losses, that will need to be grieved at the end of this time as we come to realize what has been lost forever. But there's also something else is going on at this time. The unusual challenges of this moment I have also exposed to us some of the false notions that we have been clinging to about our churches.

They have forced us to think differently about how we minister to families, how, where and when we worship and how much we need to embrace the reality of being the church outside of the building. These are actually lessons that we have been needing to learn for a very long time, but they have been thrust upon us during this season and I think many are still reeling from the loss of how they thought these things were supposed to work.

And I will warn you, while God is sympathetic to our grief over these losses, I think there is also impatience. God is asking, how long will you grieve and are you ready to fill your horn with oil and go. It is time to embrace a new and different future, and I believe the moment is coming when God will ask of us what God asked of Samuel. **"Fill your horn with oil and set out."**