

Bless to Me  
 The Struggling Times: Facing Illness, Loss, and Grief  
 7.16.17  
 Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
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 Texts: Psalm 31 and 2 Corinthians 4: 8-10

As we've been learning during our Bless to Me worship series, Celtic Christians bless all seasons and matters of life, both the joyful and the difficult times

Over the summer, during our series we have focused on a variety of blessings: everyday blessings, the blessing of special passages of life (graduation and leaving for a new place), and the blessing of the birth of babies.

This Sunday we examine the blessing of struggles in our lives including dealing with the death of ones we love as well as our own death.

Right about now, some of you may be thinking, "Pastor, do we have to talk about death in *church*?" Well, yes, we do. Ours is a death defying society but church is the place where most of you and many of those whom you love come to be comforted when death comes for each of us. If we can't talk about death here, where can we talk about it?

Today's scriptures are full of reminders that life can be full of struggles. Psalm 31 is a plea to God for rescue, mercy, and courage. And the 2 Corinthians verse begins with the words, "We are experiencing all kinds of trouble." Scriptures remind us that we are not alone in our struggles.

For memorial services, families often request the John 14:2 scripture, which reads (in the King James Version): *In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*

There is great comfort in thinking about a place being prepared for us, a place where we may be reunited with our loved ones beyond this life. Yet, that comfort does not take away the grief associated with death.

When I came to ordained ministry, I was one well acquainted with grief, having lost a brother to addiction, losing my mother to ovarian cancer nine months later and dealing with my dad's death three years later. The importance of walking with grief, bearing the sorrow of grief, and making space to grieve were all familiar to me. Participating in a grief group allowed me to begin the healing process and see the blessing of healing in community.

Dan and I spent this past week at Chautauqua Institution in New York. We try each year on our way to Chautauqua to visit my "courtesy aunt", Janet Gustafson who now lives at the Lutheran Retirement Center in Zelienople, Pennsylvania. Aunt Jan was the one who predicted when I was still very young that, "Some day that Suzie Schmidt is going to be a preacher." During this year's visit, Aunt Jan said, "You know, it's getting more and more difficult for me to see, hear, and get around." At 93 years old, it would be easy for Janet to focus not only on these losses in her present life but also those over her life time (which include losing a husband to Alzheimer's and the inability have children). But in the midst of grieving her losses, Janet sees blessings: the care she receives and the friends she has made in her new home.

It is possible to get over some of life's losses. And there are certain kinds for grief that won't go away. It is not always easy to see the blessing of this kind of grief about which Jill Smolowe writes,

*This is the grief that never extinguishes. The grief that cannot be gotten through, gotten over, gotten past. The forever-after grief.*

*If you've never lost a loved one, this must sound merciless, even downright cruel. Certainly, while in its throes, forever-after grief can feel like that. But here's the surprising thing: if you open yourself to it, there's a silver lining that can be quite wonderful and comforting — as I was reminded just recently.<sup>1</sup>*

Writing about her grief, Smolowe tells about the multiple family deaths she faced in a very short period of time including her spouse, her sister, and her mother.

On the second anniversary of her sister's death, Smolowe decides to take a trip to a Utah resort, a place where her sister who was a hiker would have very much been at home. Smolowe finds herself missing her sister terribly and while at the resort grieves deeply for her sister. She spends hours crying and weeping and sobbing.

About that deep sorrow, Smolowe writes,

*If you're feeling sorry for me, please, don't. During the hours I was tossed by this unanticipated wave of sorrow, I knew I could tolerate my sadness. Time has taught me that these waves come — and then go.*

*Perhaps more surprising, even as I lay curled in a soggy heap, I felt grateful for this wallop of forever-after grief. It provided reassurance that my sister hasn't faded to a beloved, but distant, memory. Instead, for those hours, my sister was once again a vivid presence in my mind and heart. There was pain, yes, but there was also the solace of knowing that she is still very much with me.*

*I count that as a blessing.<sup>2</sup>*

The naming and recognition of the loss of a person, a relationship, a career, a home, a lifestyle, or one's health, allow us to move toward seeing blessing in the midst of loss.

There is also the matter of coming to grips with our own death. This past January, I participated in a retreat entitled, "The Soul of Aging." One of the creators of the course, Caryl Ann Casbon, wrote a poem entitled The Final Carry On which provides others a way of viewing death in a different light. This poem has become a blessing to me.

## **The Final Carry-On**

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Smolowe, The Quiet Blessing of Grief That Never Ends  
<http://www.nextavenue.org/quiet-blessing-forever-grief/>  
Accessed July 12, 2017

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I heard about a mortician who handed out  
300 empty suitcases, then asked they be filled with things to  
be packed for the journey into death.

He displayed them in galleries and airports, other crossroads of sorts, inviting busy travelers to  
pause, consider final destinations.

I know what I'll pack for this journey where there's no need for boarding passes nor security  
screening delays.

I'll ride the last wave out on a surfboard,  
wear a pair of dark glasses to handle the intense light.  
Tuck my cat, Stewart, under my arm to remind me to be like her, more curious than afraid.

I'll pack a telescope and iPhone to spy on my dear ones left behind,  
then text them:  
"I love you...I'm not far away at all."

I'd slip in a bottle of Windex to wash clear any unfinished business  
from the mirror of my old life, plus eyeglasses for 20/20 vision  
to see what it had all been about.

For the Welcoming Committee Picnic,  
I'll load it up with Mom's favorite iceberg lettuce salad,  
a box of See's Candy for Dad,  
and  
a book about flying saucers for Grandma.

In my pocket, I'll hide a seashell that hums ocean songs,  
sings praises of Mother Earth's beauty.  
Ultimately, I'll release this baggage to grow wings that promise to carry me to this new freedom,  
directly into the Heart of the Great Mystery.

As a community of faith, we have grieved the loss of many loved ones together. Each of  
these losses impacted us differently.

Although each of these losses were difficult, I found the death of Mark Miller a special  
struggle. His father Robert Miller faced Mark's death courageously. Today almost one year  
after Mark's death, we will bless the lights which adorn our outside front entry. These lights  
are the gift of Robert Miller given in Mark's memory. They will serve as a reminder that in  
the midst of our grief, God is there and out of deep love for us sent his Son, the light of the  
world, our greatest blessing.

Amen