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**“Please, Please, Don’t Lose That Lovin’ Feeling” – Rev Michael Obenauer -
Sermon, Opening Worship Service, CAM @ Mimanagish, Montana-Northern
Wyoming Conference, United Church of Christ, Friday, 8/9/2019**

Scripture Readings: John 15: 12 – 17, Revelation 22: 1 – 2, 12 – 13 (NRSV)

John 15: 12 - 14 – (Jesus said . . .) “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Revelation 22: 1 – 2, 12 – 13 - Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (And Jesus said to me), “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

“Change Happens! Please Don’t Lose That Lovin’ Feeling”

I was sorting through the garbage and recyclables after cleaning out the refrigerator last Friday. All of this is a thankless, but necessary, job. It can be postponed only so long, and then it overflows and the crud has the upper hand.

As I was standing in the laundry room adding more recyclable plastic and paper to that bag, it occurred to me how much this process is like grieving.

Now I am no stranger to grief. In recent years, I have said goodbye to my work life to move to the hometown of my spouse. I have taken care of an ageing, much-loved Beagle until euthanasia was the only compassionate, wise option. I have cared for my beloved spouse for almost two years until she died, a month after her cherished dog.

I have actively worked at the grieving process, attempting to use many of the tools which I know from the rich experience I have had in pastoral ministry. I have found some work for me, and some just don’t.

There is one tool that I can say has helped, even when I have found myself in puddles of tears – that is namely dealing with the garbage and sorting out the recyclables. Garbage can not be reused or reclaimed. It just has to be disposed of. Good riddance!

Being a born packrat, recyclables are another matter, probably the subject of a later sermon. The main learning here are the questions: Can this be of use to someone else, put on the church rummage sale? Can these items be crushed, melted down to be remade to not do damage to the natural environment?

I am an experienced griever. I know some memories just have to be laid to rest, thrown out, the LP record broken and shattered. I know others, however, have some redemptive quality. They are reminders of love, faith, hope, peace, and joy. Sometimes they, too, are painful, and worthwhile. They can be recycled and remain useful.

The ancients also had their deep, very present experiences of grief and dealing with loss. When the children of Israel languished in captivity in Egypt, they confused security with freedom. Moses, ever the persistent, responsible Father figure, did everything he could to wean them from the rich milk of security until he finally said, “Enough already! We are on the move! Our journey is our home. Tomorrow we begin to travel. God, the fiery pillar, who has led us thus far goes before us.” When these pilgrims in a strange life and a strange land reached the Jordan River, their leaders told them to pick up a stone as they crossed to build monuments as a symbol of where they had been. They knew something about grieving.

The ancient mystic and poet who put personal dreams into the Book of Revelation was no stranger to grief. He had seen loved ones in his faith community go through painful ordeals of separation and loss. He might have witnessed the horror of beloved members of his flock taken by occupying armies to be used as human torches, set on fire to light the way to fun and games. He might have gladly taken their place. Instead he was sent into exile, where alone and a long way off, he grieved, and worked it out in the code of his revelation.

He sent words of encouragement to his oppressed people through symbols they understood and found meaningful and hopeful. Signs of faith and community like God and the Lamb present in their everlasting City, where the crystal, life encouraging waters flowed around the Tree of Life, bountiful with twelve fruits and leaves on which to feed and find life everlasting. To top it off, this mystic placed the words spoken by Jesus, the center of this community’s faith: “Be of good faith, hold fast to that which is good, I am coming soon. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

In this way full of mystery, poetry, and meaning, this early leader was encouraging the community he loved to not give up hope, to not give up faith. His message echoes

down the ages: “Whatever you experience, this is not the end. Change happens. Bad things happen. Don’t believe the worst. There is something and someone greater and better who holds the whole of life in strong, divine, ever-loving hands. This God is there before time, in all time, beyond all time.

I grieved Mimanagish when I left it the last time several years ago. Memories flooded my consciousness, on again, off again, of times, of events, of experiences of learning and gifts of insight, of joy and sadness. What shines through the most brightly in all of this grieving, what usually shines through in other experiences of grieving and loss, are the human beings, the people, with whom I experienced life in this mystical place. I have snapshots I carry with me in my soul, in my mind, in my heart that I cannot lose. They remind me of my beloved community, of my sojourners in the faith, of those who have loved and cherished me even when I was hard to reach. I don’t want to lose that lovin’ feeling. It is what, in its composite gathered from the length and depth of my life lends meaning and hope. Sometimes I am challenged to live at the core of my faith and forgive . . . forgive others, forgive God, forgive the Church, forgive myself. It is love and memories of love that fuel me to move on, to not wallow long, to find strength to put one foot in front of the other. No, I don’t want to lose that lovin’ feeling, and I don’t want you to lose it either. _

We need each other. This world out there, which God loves, is, at times, a tough, harsh, hurtful place to be. We need all of the love, care, forgiveness, compassion, we can muster to live as Christ bearers to the world. Maybe we need to acknowledge our grief and sense of loss, our frustration, and love and companionship from our beloved community can help us to make it through, to know we are not alone. We might need to face our respective baggage of grief and loss.

There is one quality of grief I have learned and relearned: “Grief needs to be heard.” Let me repeat that: “Grief needs to be heard.”

Look at the example of the interaction of the Children of Israel and Moses. There was all that “murmuring” going on in the ranks. What was all that about? Well, it might be what happened between a bunch of passive-aggressive folks, not wanting to talk about their pains and problems with anyone who could really make a difference. It might have been about a bunch of folks who just had to verbalize everything, talk it out before they could get it out.

Or it might be the tried and true nature expressing itself: “Grief needs to be heard.” Grief just is. It will come out in some way, somehow, guided or misguided, planned or just in a “Whoops! Where did that come from?” moment. Grief can manifest itself in anger or frustration or depression in unconnected places, at unsuspecting people. Grief, not heard in a clear, direct, responsible way, sometimes does a lot of collateral damage.

“Grief needs to be heard.”

Maybe, just maybe, it is important, and healing, for us to take responsibility for our own grieving, inasmuch as we can. Maybe, just maybe we need to place ourselves with other people this weekend, who could possibly need us to grieve with them. There might be folks present, right here, right now, who might not be there at other times, in other places. Quite possibly, this “Place of Singing Waters” could help us sing a song of grief together so we might leave here a little more healthy, a little more whole, a tad more put together.

“Grief needs to be heard.”

This might be the anticipatory loss of Mimanagish, this place of deep memory and meaning. It might be other losses like significant others, or communities of support through death or attrition. It might be losses which are brought up and complicate our lives when we deal with new losses.

I believe from my own life’s experiences we need every bit of community, every bit of love and concern, every bit of prayer from kindred souls that we can get. We need to keep in touch with that lovin’ feeling, and be active in our care of that connection.

There is a song which rings in my heart, and in my memory which never lets me down. It is always powerful, always lending me hope for the future. It is a song I began to love as a young adult, and then heard many, many times at this “Place of Singing Waters”, to the point that it is a powerful part of me. James Taylor, whose music flows across generations, inspired teenagers while they were immersed in this sacred space.

“When you’re down and troubled,

And you need a helping hand

And nothing, oh, nothing is going right,

Just close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night.

You just call out my name
And, you know, wherever I am
I'll come running,
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer, or fall
All you've got to do is call
And, I'll be there, yes I will,
You've got a friend.

This song always brings me back to a significant part of my beloved community. Through thick and thin, through highs and lows, through good time and bad, through joy and sorrow, in grief, my beloved community brings me back to life and love.

You may have to throw away the garbage, scrub out the crud, sort through the recyclables. Sing this song. Don't give up on your beloved community, and the Still Speaking God which moves this community into the future. As God waded with our early Christian sisters and brothers into the River surrounding the Tree of Life, so God promises to be there with us as the waters roll. As God moved ahead of our spiritual ancestors at the Jordan, God moves ahead of us at the Boulder. Don't lose that loving feeling!

It is a great day to be alive! Thanks be to God! AMEN.