

Grief and Life – Hannah Hawksbee

II Samuel 1:1,17-27; II Corinthians 8:7-15; Psalm 130; Mark 5:21-4

Everyday, newspapers, television programs, web pages, and radio stations report stories of lives lost. We find funeral announcements on the counters at Dollar General and the bank. And I'm scared that stories of death and dying become too familiar, that they become mere numbers we hear on a daily basis. Perhaps we are culturally in danger of falling into the temptation of thinking that the loss of two in a recent bombing is not that bad..... We argue, "at least it wasn't five or six." If I'm honest, I'm not sure that I know what it really means to lose a whole human being.

About this time last year, I was back home in South America spending time with my family. We decided to take a trip back to the places where we had lived and traveled to on a regular basis during our life in Argentina. So we set out in our little blue car along roads that reminded me of the car games my mum entertained us with on the long trips we used to take. Most of our vacation ended being spent on these roads. We traveled for two days to reach our final destination, only to turn around a day later and make the same trip back home to Paraguay. This was not our original plan; we had people to visit, places to see. However, on our first day there, my dad called his family in England to see how they were doing. The message he received from the other end of the phone was clear; it was time for him to go home to be with them, to stand beside them as they prepared to say goodbye to my granddad, my dad's father, my grandmother's husband, and many people's friend. They had to learn what it means to lose a whole human being.

Last week, while talking to my mum over skype, she told me that one of the guys my brother used to hang out with had died in a tragic car accident. It was the day of his graduation, and he had been on the way to the airport to pick up his sister, who was coming home for the occasion, when it happened. The graduation was cancelled, and friends gathered in a much different setting to remember his life. They had to learn what it means to lose a whole human being.

I've always lived an ocean away from my grandparents, so I never knew my granddad very well, and I've never lost someone very close to me. I'm not sure that my imagination stretches far enough or deep enough to allow me to understand what it's like to lose someone. I don't know what it is like for my dad to live with the knowledge that he no longer has someone to call on Father's Day. I don't know what it's like for my grandmother not to have her friend and partner of 50 years next to her at the breakfast table anymore. I don't know what it would have been like for the sister waiting at the airport to discover why she had been stood up or for those classmates to have their celebrations replaced with mourning. Many of you probably know....

The reality of human loss touched my family community through these two deaths, one the death of an older gentleman who had lived a good life and one the death of a young man about to set out on a new phase of life. However different the stories may be, tragedy and loss abide in each. People were still left behind to live with the grief. David's lament in the first chapter of second Samuel gives voice to the grief he felt at discovering that Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle. They each had different stories and different relationships with David. Though Saul and David had once had a good relationship, things had gone downhill after God informed Samuel of his decision to remove Saul from the throne and replace him with David. Towards the end, Saul had been pursuing David's life, but for some reason this seems irrelevant in David's lament. As David leads the wider community in lamenting the death of its royalty, he dwells on the good that the former king had done for the people. The loss of one once anointed by God remains significant; it is a tragedy that should not be celebrated by any, even by their enemies the Philistines. Though this lament is a public one, we see glimpses of David's personal sorrow as well, especially as he mourns the loss of Jonathan, Saul's son and David's close friend. We are left without any doubt regarding how important Jonathan was to David, and this seems like the appropriate response. The deaths of each of these four men requires mourning, and the void left by the loss of their lives requires recognition. Things will be different from here on out.

And yet, the lectionary prevents us from stopping here. For some reason it places this story of the death of two men alongside the gospel story about the life-giving encounters of two women with Jesus. We are left with the frustrating, awkward task of transitioning from the grief of death to the joy of life.

It's an unusual and socially challenging tale that we find in this section of Mark. We've moved from an Old Testament story about the upper crust of society- men in high places- to a story about two people on much lower rungs in the social hierarchy, women. Firstly, we see Jairus, a leader of the synagogue asking Jesus to heal his daughter, who is "at the point of death." Jairus would have had a pretty good standing in society, but he has come to beg Jesus to save his daughter. Daughters in this culture were not considered anywhere near as valuable as sons. It's an unusual moving act of love that is displayed by this father. As a leader of the synagogue, approaching Jesus and begging him for help, probably would have required a great deal of humility on Jairus's part.

Jesus agrees to help, but before He makes it to Jairus's house, there is an interruption. A bleeding woman who has suffered for twelve years without relief enters the story intent on touching a corner or maybe just the tip of Jesus's clothing, believing that the touch will make her well. She doesn't want to make a scene or draw attention to herself; she just wants to make contact and slip back into the crowd. Whatever it is that is plaguing her body leaves her with symptoms that make her unclean in the eyes of her culture and therefore socially unacceptable. Her touch could make someone else unclean. No wonder she approaches Jesus with fear and trembling when he begins looking for the person who touched him.

I've probably been watching way too many episodes of House in my free time. House is a TV series about a doctor who runs a diagnosis department in a hospital. He spends his time trying to diagnose and cure obscure ailments, and he's pretty good at it. However, when it comes to his patient's social/emotional needs, he appears to have no social skills whatsoever.....probably because he chooses not to. Dr. House comes across as harsh and insensitive, more interested in the illness than the patient. I think I keep watching the show because I want to see him crack; I want believe he cares about his patients. The story here in Mark portrays Jesus as Dr. House's polar opposite. Sure Jesus cures the sick, but he isn't as much interested in their illness as he is in their life and quality of it. He wants to give this woman her humanity back. He wants her to know that he sees her, that he thinks her special enough to bring back into society, that she can at last live in the freedom of knowing that she is clean enough to relate to. Jesus calls her daughter. The choice of this word echoes the word that Jairus, a loving father, used when begging Jesus for help. In addition, Jesus commends her for her role in the healing. "Your faith has made you well." Her participation in the relationship mattered. This story shows us a Jesus at work in the business of restoring wholeness of life to a human being. Health and community.

It is interesting that Jesus takes his time with this woman even though he knows that Jairus' daughter is dying. He doesn't seem to be in a hurry, but while this is taking place, the little girl dies, and the mourners start streaming to the house. Jesus responds to the news by telling the father not be afraid but to believe. Jairus has just witnessed what the belief of one woman did for her. Now it's his turn to participate in this life bringing encounter with Jesus. And as Jesus takes the little girl's hand and speaks to her, life is restored yet again. Jesus chose to see life in her little body and awaken her from sleep instead of leaving her for dead. The author notes that the little girl was twelve, the age at which girls in that tradition began transitioning into womanhood; it was also the number of years that the other woman had bled. Each had the chance to live again after the passing of those twelve years.

Perhaps our texts for today ask us to remember that death is surrounded by life on every side. Maybe we need to enter into the joy of gospel story after the sorrow of David's lament because our final note is Jesus, and He is not content to leave us with the taste of death, to let us believe that that's where the story ends. For him it seems to be all about life, and not just mere-existence life, but abundant life.

I stayed with my grandmother over Christmas break. When I arrived she showed me a box that contained the dozens of cards that friends and family had sent her during the time before and after my granddad's death. I carried them up to my bedroom and would read a couple of them before I went bed each evening. The cards were filled with stories about my granddad, and they spoke of the characteristics people loved most about him. There were cards from people all over the world saying how much they appreciated him. I realize now that the grief we felt at losing him was rooted in the life he led. We were sad because his story was beautiful. It has come to an end, but we loved it while it lasted and will continue to leaf back through the pages we find in our recollections.

I wonder how the Jesus from our gospel reading today would have us write the stories of our lives. I'd like to think he'd want us to be a part of his people, to be fully invested in the business of seeing others the way Jesus saw the bleeding woman and to look for life in the sleeping. I think he'd want us to live whole lives with all that that may entail. And I think he'd want us not to miss out on hearing the stories that others are working on, that when each story ends the grief we feel would spring from the understanding that the story told was such a good one (though perhaps would have like a few more chapters). Yet, we loved the story while it lasted; we're sad to see it end; and we'll continue leaf back through the pages we still possess. And perhaps we'll find hope in knowing the story of the little girl that Mark tells foreshadows the story of Jesus, which Mark ends with an empty tomb.....