

Sermon: What Love Leaves Behind

Year B, Lent 4

[John 3:16-21](#)

Offered March 15, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Catherine Merrill

Remembering a loss hurts. There's an emptiness inside us that never seems to lose its raw edges. When we get anywhere near it, when we really think about the people we have lost, we're swept away. Memories come, some of them really great, but many of them bittersweet or sad. And we miss them so, even if the relationship was complicated, because however complicated it was, it was what we were used to. The emotions that rise are just overwhelming, like turning on the car when someone has left the radio turned up way too loud.

Remembering a loss makes it plain to us that we are broken, we carry all these razor sharp edges inside ourselves. We didn't used to be this way, back when that person was alive, but we are that way now. And we will be that way until we die. Maybe we'll get better at steering around the broken parts. We'll build new parts of ourselves and spend more time there. But that hole is always there. And the silliest things can short circuit us. Before, when the Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs arrived at the CVS register, we'd buy one and leave it under her pillow. Today, we just went in to get some vitamins and a battery and all of a sudden we can barely breathe for how much we miss her. All because of 200 calories worth of peanut butter and chocolate.

We used to mourn our losses more publicly. We'd wear special clothes for a certain amount of time. People would know we were broken and wouldn't hassle us when we tried to catch our breath in CVS. We didn't expect people to get onto their new lives quickly. We knew that loss took time to process and frankly, we wanted to know who was doing that so we could expect a little less of them. Maybe the rules were too complicated. Maybe they didn't allow individuals to do what they needed to do to grieve. Maybe the rules put way too many expectations on people who were heartbroken. I'm not saying we should bring them back, but one thing they did allow was for the community to have a role in making space for the people who had lost someone they loved.

We all so want to help someone who has lost a person they love. So a tsunami of casseroles arrive on the porch, yards get mowed, driveways plowed. Friends turn up to finish half done drywalling projects or to help someone figure out what on earth to do with three cubic yards of calico from quilts that will now not get made. That's good work, honest work, loving and helpful work. But the void doesn't get any smaller nor the edges less sharp. Sometimes, the very best thing we can do is sit together and agree that it just hurts. Nothing is going to change the hurt. But we'll be here together.

When someone is baptized, there are all kinds of promises made. We often think of parents and kids, but even if it's an adult who is getting baptized, there's a moment when the congregation promises "our love, support, and care" for the person who's being baptized. We mean it for that specific person in that specific moment, but we also mean it in general. If you are a member of the congregation, at some point someone promised to love, support and care for you. We'll pick up those promises knowing that some other community will be picking up our promises when one of our members moves away. Baptism is one of the two sacraments we celebrate. Making those promises is sacred. We may not have been there when some of our older members were baptized, some of us weren't even alive, but we'll keep those promises of love, support and care.

The Easter promise of the Resurrection is that this world is not all there is. Part of the Lenten preparation is to step more fully into this world and really live in its reality instead of being distracted by all the activities and ambitions that take us away from the people God is calling us to be.

The reality of this world is that people we have promised to love, support and care for are broken with loss. They are living every day with glass sharp edges inside them that catch them unawares. The reality of this world is that there is nothing we can do to make the void inside them any less, make the edges any less cutting. But the reality of this world is that we can, from time to time, just sit with them, remembering that we all know loss, that they are not alone. Sometimes we do that around kitchen tables. Sometimes we do that during worship.

If Lent is the time to look at the reality of living in this world, of figuring out where the divine really shows up, then we need to look at this void that is at the center of the loss. That void is often intolerable to live with, so we do all sorts of things to try to fill it up. We take on new activities or drink or make elaborate shrines to the people whose love used to fill that void. A little of any of those is fine, but the void is so large, sometimes in our efforts to not feel the shock waves as our heart bounces around that great space, we pour too much into that space. No matter how much we pour into it, it will never be filled.

Our relationship with God is like that. There is a gap between us and God, that will never be filled in this world. We long to close that gap, to become one with God. We throw all sorts of things into that gap, hoping to create some stepping stones to God. We do all kinds of things, good things, charitable things. But if we do them so that God won't seem so far away, even the most wonderful things can turn into sin, because they represent our unwillingness to learn to live separated from God and yet always yearning for God.

So learning to sit with the voids left by people we love, to live loving and faithful lives after they have passed away, is, in fact, a kind of spiritual discipline we all need to learn in order to remain in right relationship with God. If you are feeling the absence of the love of your husband or mother or friend, you are also feeling an echo of the separation from God's love too.

Jesus knew so much about love. Think about his life. He was always on the move, but surrounded by a core group of disciples. Not just the Twelve whose names we know, but a whole group of men and women who put up with so much hardship and deprivation to share the Good Word about the Kingdom of God. No one I know could work that hard without love being involved. That's as hard as raising a child. That's as hard as caring for elderly parents. That's as hard as forming a new family when your biological family couldn't find a way to make a space for you in their midst. Jesus loved the people he taught and travelled with. He had to. And they had to love him. Because no one could put up with that level of work and social exile without loving another person.

But Jesus also knew about the voids, the gaps and the longing to fill them. As he died on the Cross, he asked one of his disciples to become a son to his mother Mary, so that they would take care of each other when he could not. His teachings often centered around loving God, loving each other and loving God's Creation. Not because love fills the gaps and the echoing voids. Not because love blunts all those razor sharp edges. But because love makes it possible to live in this world with those voids and sharp edges.

So as we sit here, with each other, feeling our own voids inside us, let's reach for some love. Let's reach for those Reese's Peanut Butter eggs left under pillows and the quilts and the shoveling and the dry walling that say that we were loved and we loved the people who are gone. Losing the people we love is so brutally painful. But that void just reminds us that love leaves behind more than death can take away.