

## ***Service of Shadow and Light***

December 13, 2016

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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“Oh, how I wish I had a magic wand to make it all better,” I say quietly. The response comes even more quietly, “I wish you did, too.”

That exchange has taken place literally hundreds and hundreds of times in my ministry, as I express my deep, heartfelt longing to make it all better for one of my parishioners or friends or family members. That exchange has taken place in hospital rooms, at deathbeds, in living rooms of parents broken-hearted at the behavior of prodigal children...Sometimes I am speaking with the spouse of one struggling with memory challenges, sometimes with someone whose partner has been unfaithful, sometimes with someone who is unable to find employment, with those who suffer debilitating depression and anxiety...and on and on and on. The wish for the magic wand.

It is a deep and holy privilege with which we pastors are entrusted... to be allowed into the most intimate and profoundly meaningful moments of life—those times of ineffable joy: baptisms, confirmations, weddings—AND also to be welcomed into the hard, hard places.

There are so many hard places.

“Life isn’t fair,” we often say. Or, on the other hand, we might say, “Life is perfectly fair. It breaks everyone’s heart.”

Which is perhaps not quite true. Life only breaks the hearts of those who choose to love. This is the price we pay for love: Heartbreak...sometimes deep wracking, chest-heaving sobs of despair heartbreak...That is the price we pay for love.

There are so many hard places. As I have wrestled with this meditation over the past weeks I have been led down different paths depending on what kind of hard place I was contemplating at the moment. Let me offer a few different thoughts in the hopes that at least one might be used by the Holy Spirit to bring you comfort or encouragement.

Some of us are missing loved ones who have died. I can’t begin to imagine what it’s like in the homes of those who have lost a child or grandchild, or a spouse of 60 years...

I miss my brother Cal so much. It's been two and a half years. I'm tired of him being dead. Enough already. And it's not getting easier.

"Christmas is the season when you wait to see if the hurt has let up any since this time last year—and you want it to, so you can get on with your life—and you don't want it to..." (Barbara Brown Taylor) ...because would that mean that your loved one has slipped farther away from you?

Long ago I officiated at the funeral of a man I first knew as a friend, and then later as a parishioner. He died of cancer at age 55. Way too young. I may times have thought back to what his sister said at the service, "We are going to miss Rich so much. But in the light of eternity, this time of separation is so very brief." It has now been thirty years. Yet...in the light of eternity this time of separation *is* so very brief.

Some of us are not grieving a death, but we are experiencing great pain and disappointment in life. A famous psychiatrist once said, "I have been a therapist for 30 years and I have treated thousands of clients. And every one of my patients had the same problem: the people in their lives won't do what they want them to." Anybody feel some resonance with that?

My kids won't do what I want them to. My parents won't do what I want them to. The government won't do what I want them to. And most of these things are completely out of our control. We are wallowing in "If then" thinking. "IF my family member would just... (fill in the blank) THEN I would be happy." "IF the right person got elected, THEN I would be happy." "IF my pastor would only...THEN I would be happy." Most of that is out of our control.

I pray the Serenity Prayer dozens of times a week. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." Most things are out of our control.

Control. The word "anxiety" comes from the German word "angst:" "a straight or narrow passage that restricts breathing." Isn't that perfect for that feeling?

"Anxiety is so much a part of modern life that it seems automatic, an occupational hazard of being a finite creature in a universe of infinite possibilities. But anxiety is more than that..." The magnificent

preacher Barbara Brown Taylor addresses one way to deal with anxiety. Before I read that, let me hasten to say that in dealing with anxiety there is a place for medication, there is a place for therapy, there is a place for support groups. But isn't there also a place for confession? (And as usual in my sermons, I am mostly preaching to myself and just allowing you to listen in.) Barbara Brown Taylor writes that "Insofar as my anxiety separates me from God, from other human beings, and from my own soul, I am prepared to call anxiety a sin, one that calls for my repentance...In short, what is absent when anxiety is present is faith—faith that God will be God,...

"Giving up anxiety does not mean giving up responsibility, or concern, or the wish to live a productive life. But it does mean giving up our incessant, sterile worrying ...and our poisonous illusion that if we do stop worrying our lives will collapse. This is sin, and the remedy for it is twofold: first confession and then amendment of life. Do you desire to be saved from the sin of anxiety? Then get on your knees and confess it. Confess everything you have tried to control, all the ways you have tried to manufacture your own security, all the times you have turned away from God in order to seek your own solutions. Confess what it has cost you, and how poorly it has worked to bring you peace. Then ask for forgiveness, the forgiveness that is yours before you ask, and within the freedom of that forgiveness amend your life. Make a different choice, a choice against anxiety, and live out of that choice for a change.

"Saint Paul (says, and St. Paul had a LOT to be anxious about, yet he writes): 'choose courage' (II Cor. 5), which is not the absence of fear but the willingness to go on in spite of it. Choose to face your life, your death, your God, the dangerous unknown. Choose to face it without resorting to the old perfectionism, the old driven-ness, the old restlessness and outrage. Choose courage, even knowing as you do that you cannot choose it once and for all, that if courage is what you want you must choose it over and over again, every day that you live, if real living is what you are after. That is what it takes. Confession and choice, forgiveness and courage, over and over, a new way of life." (*Mixed Blessings*, pp. 107-108)

Shifting gears, a story:

*Among the Jews who celebrate Passover, there is a tradition of saving a seat at their Seder feast for Elijah, the prophet who is supposed to bring the news that the Messiah has finally come. At a poignant*

*moment in the service, the door (in the home) is flung open for Elijah and everyone falls silent with anticipation. For thousands of years that door has been opened, and for thousands of years all that has entered has been the wind. One Hasidic story tells of a pious Jew who (complained to his rabbi), 'For about forty years I have opened the door for Elijah every Seder night, waiting for him to come, but he never does. What is the reason?'*

*The rabbi answered, 'In your neighborhood there lives a very poor family with many children. Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family celebrate the next Passover at his house, and for this purpose provide him and his whole family with (all the food and) everything necessary for the eight days of Passover. Then on the Seder night Elijah will certainly come.'*

*The man did as the rabbi told him, but after Passover he came back and claimed that again he had waited in vain to see Elijah. The rabbi answered, 'I know very well that Elijah came on the Seder night to the house of your poor neighbor. But of course you could not see him (...for you were) Elijah's face that night.'"* (Mixed Blessings, pp. 86-87)

In the midst of our own darkness in this season, what might we do to bring light to others?