

April 14, 2020

Dear Members and Friends of The Old Scotch Church,

The week after Easter is often taken by pastors for vacation, because Holy Week is demanding. Even though the resurrection of Jesus has been celebrated, post-Easter can be somewhat flat. The worst week after my mom died 2.5 years ago was the week after her memorial service. I thought I'd have this sense of closure, and a growing peace, and yet that is when I missed her most thus far. Now there are all the holidays and birthdays where that returns.

Last December, I was sent a link to a podcast about Eugene Peterson, now a year after his death, and six months after his wife, Jan, died. When I finished listening to it, I was in tears. That's when I knew I had what I began calling 'accumulated grief' to work on, knowing that my work as a pastor would be diminished if I could not walk with others experiencing grief should I be stuck in my own.

My 2020 goal which I told the Session was to work through some accumulated grief so I'd have a smaller heap of sadness showing up at unexpected times. And especially so I'd be present for the congregation as we grieve through our losses together.

Then in January Mike Charles moved to hospice care after his valiant, powerful, life-choosing battle with cancer for 6.5 years. Mike died March 6. Then Russ Sterenberg started to decline after his 2 year persevering and defiant fight against cancer. Despite sheltering orders, I went to see Russ and Lois, using distancing practices to give pastoral care, and to read Luke's resurrection account just a couple of hours before Russ died on March 28.

Friends, we are grieving. We've lost saints in the congregation, and some of you have lost family and friends in these first months of 2020. We've lost jobs, investments, community, worship at church, travel plans, school classes and events, graduations, birthday parties, volunteer service, eating out ... I could fill a page with the list. We are grieving.

A dear friend told me the analogy of the bison and the cattle in Montana and Wyoming. Bison survive the hard winter storms of these regions far better than the cattle, because the bison move into an oncoming storm, pushing to get through it, while the cattle tend to run away and wear themselves out as the unavoidable storm hits them. Consider the storm our grief. The healthiest *and the fastest* way to move through the stages of grief (those of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance ... sound familiar?) is to name each stage and process our way through it.

For my own work on grief, I took a day in February to go through the file I've kept with notes from every memorial service I've officiated in my 21 years of ministry. As I remembered the saints I've had the privilege of commending to Jesus our Lord, I reflected on the four questions below, taken from *Deepening Engagement* by Diane Millis, and the chapter on "Honoring Your Grief." I know many of you are working through closets or a box of 'stuff' here and there, and I'd invite you to pull up phone or computer photos or that box of pictures you've always meant to put in an album, and take the time to remember your own losses, perhaps with reflecting on these questions as well.

What am I grateful for from the experience or person I'm grieving?

How was I positively impacted?

How was I stretched or challenged?

Is there anything I need to say or do to move through my grief?

I also invite you again to prayer, to offer to God the hurt in your heart and to receive God's healing balm. Remember, you can tell God *anything*. If you don't believe me, just read some psalms, maybe starting with Psalm 42, 58, 69 or 137.

I've included in this mailing [an article from the Harvard Business Review about grief](#) particularly attached to the Covid pandemic. The author also has some suggestions for ways to work through our grief using secular code words for practices like fasting on anger, feasting on gratitude, being in prayer, and calling on the well of God's love to offer compassion to others.

Enter into community in these new forms we're leaning on. Calls are a big piece of this, and I invite you to make a call or send a text, email, or card. My home number is 503.430.7435, and I'd be glad to talk and pray with you. Any of our Deacons or Elders are also available for conversation, as is Chris Macfarlane, our Parish Associate. Or close your eyes and go to church by playing an audio recording of our worship service in the last 3 years. Or find someone 6 feet away and chat. Our neighbors have started gathering along the sidewalk to talk each evening.

When you find a way that helps you put your head down and move through grief, share it with others, that they can join the march, looking for that resurrection life to renew here and now. For Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!

As we continue to worship from home, we will post service links and other information to the church website (www.oldscothchurch.org), the church private Facebook page, and through these emails. Next week's pastoral letter will be sent on Wednesday, April 22, to include information from the Session meeting held on April 21.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Tracie