

# Lost

November 20, 2022

In the summer of 2020, I did an online course entitled, “How to lead when you don’t know where you’re going.” Susan Beaumont had written a book by this title pre-pandemic. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! In the broadest of brushstrokes, Beaumont talked about letting the Holy Spirit lead, about listening for Godly wisdom, both personally as well as techniques to try to draw out that wisdom in community.

A little later, I was talking with a colleague about the course who was still particularly anxious about the future of the church. When she heard the title “How to lead when you don’t know where you’re going,” she would get even more anxious. She explained, “My teenage daughter has absolutely NO sense of direction but doesn’t realize it. When we’re lost in a strange city, or even in a department store, she’ll say, “Let’s go this way,” and inevitably get us even more lost. I can respect the anxiety that comes up from not knowing where you’re going, and from wondering if those we’re following know either. Being lost is, quite simply, disorienting.

Today, our church is celebrating our annual Memorial Sunday, a day in which we lift up in prayer, with thanksgiving, our church members and friends who have died in the last year, as well as all of those we’ve loved who have died. As I contemplate this commemoration this year, I can’t help but think of how, for many, death and grieving and our experience of the pandemic are intertwined. In both, we experience loss.

Diana Butler Bass, a church historian, lifts up the fact that the word “lost” can mean both what is gone and it can also mean “misplaced, displaced, dislocated.” Butler Bass has done some interesting work, naming ways the pandemic has felt like dislocation, and today I’d like to suggest that these dislocations dovetail with the ways we often experience grief.

The first dislocation she names is temporal dislocation. Especially in 2020, I heard people talking about experiencing this. We seemed to have “lost our sense of time as it existed before the pandemic. How often have you thought: What day is this? What time is it? Did I miss an event? What month is it? That’s temporal dislocation.” And even though we’re in a different stage of the pandemic, I still hear of people having this odd experience of time. Grief often does this to us, too.

The second dislocation Butler Bass names is historical dislocation. “We’ve lost our sense of where we are in the larger story of both our own lives and our communal stories. History has been disrupted. Where are we? Where are we going? The growth of conspiracy theories, the intensity of social media, political and religious ‘deconstructions’ – these are signs of a culture seeking a meaningful story to frame their lives because older stories have failed. That’s historical dislocation.”

This, too, happens when we grieve. So much of how we understand ourselves is in relationship to one another, as spouse, parent, friend. When a loved one dies, one of the projects of grieving is learning to frame our personal stories in light of this new reality.

Butler Bass' third dislocation is physical dislocation. "We lost our sense of embodiment with others and geographical location. For millions, technology has moved 'physicality' into cyberspace and most of us had no idea what to do with this virtual sense of location. Without our familiar sense of being bodily in specific spaces, things like gardening, baking, sewing, and painting have emerged as ways of feeling the ground and the work of our hands. We've striven to maintain some sort of embodiment even amid isolation. But the disconnection between our bodies, places, and other bodies has been profound. That's physical dislocation."

This physical dislocation can be some of the most obvious amidst grief – an empty seat at the holiday table, no one's freezing feet as you climb into bed. But it can also be somewhat subtle; fewer gifts to buy and less laundry to do.

Butler Bass' final dislocation is relational dislocation. Here she reminds us of how awkward it felt, and in some cases still feels, to be maskless or in a crowd or when the plexiglass comes down.

I had a personal experience of this Thursday. Scott and I went out to watch the Packers game, and an acquaintance came up and started talking to me six inches from my face. It took all my willpower not to hold my fingers up in a sign of a cross like a vampire to get him to move away, and I am actually contemplating a garlic necklace the next time we go out, just to keep people at a safe distance.

Relational dislocation happens in grief, too. It's why it often takes people time to start coming back to church after a spouse dies, or how we avoid certain places and activities that bring about our loved ones who have died.

## **Hope**

With all of this dislocation, whether rooted in pandemic or other personal loss, it's no wonder many of us have felt like we're in an extended time of grief. Grieving is important. Scientists who study grief say that it takes time for our brains to learn new patterns and behaviors after the death of a loved one.

The role of faith and church is interesting here. "The word religion is believed to have come from the Latin, religare, meaning to 'bind' or 'reconnect.'" Religare is about mending what has been broken, recovering what has been mislaid, and reconnecting that which is frayed."

Now, of course, we cannot resuscitate our loved ones. But, if so much of grief is an experience of dislocation, perhaps the role of faith and community is to help one another in our relocation. To develop meaningful patterns and stories and structures.

## **Scriptures**

The passage that I read from the Letter to the Philippians is one that we often read in Memorial Services. "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of Peace will be with you." On the day of the service, I'll often encourage families to pick up the mantle of some of the good and lovely things their loved one did and continue to do them. It's only with some time that the intended meaning of this passage can

come into focus: the way you're going to keep going and have a meaningful, robust life is by locating your story within the Jesus story. That is, by doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in Jesus. By embodying mercy and kindness and inclusion. By championing justice and hope.

Live Jesus' teachings and life lessons, and you'll find your feet under you again. The brain fog will clear. The sense of disconnectedness will subside. To be sure, you'll still miss your beloved. There will always be a hole in your heart. But the way we find our way when we don't know where we're going is to allow the Holy Spirit to draw us forward, and we do that by binding ourselves to Jesus' ways.

This often seems easier said than done. I just spent an inordinate amount of time describing how grief, like the pandemic, dislocates us. That, I think, is where the passage from Deuteronomy which Megan read for us comes in. It's not just a lovely reflection on being thankful. The idea of offering your first fruits to God is abundantly hopeful. Maybe it's because I'm not much of a gardener, but every time I harvest my first tomatoes, I'm somewhat scared that they'll also be the last. Giving God our first fruits is an act of faith. It's a tangible behavior that says, "I believe there will be more." In grief, we put one foot in front of the other, trusting there will be ground to catch us. In church, we help one another find meaning and purpose and relocation when we have been lost.

### **Conclusion**

Friends, the pandemic created the most cohesive experience of grief humanity has ever known, and amidst that many of us experienced profound personal griefs as well. Even though the worst of the pandemic looks to be behind us, we still don't know where we're going. It's going to take a lot of time, personally and collectively, to relocate ourselves in our new reality.

But don't let that lead you to despair. We have Jesus and his witness of hope and connection. Jesus, whose family was forced to flee as refugees when he was an infant. Jesus, whose hometown crowd tried to run him off of a cliff because he dared to suggest that God could work through their sworn enemies. Jesus, who has known dislocation himself and, who, in the midst of that dislocation, taught us to love our neighbors without exception and to love ourselves.

Friends, in our personal and collective grief, we may not know where we're going, but I do know who I'm going to let lead. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9**  
November 20, 2022