

Grief Groceries

November 19, 2023

I/You/We Need

A couple of years ago, Scott and I gave each other matching leather travel bags for our anniversary. We both had been using gym bags when we traveled for the weekend, and so this felt rather adult.

One of the problems with buying things online, which I'm sure many of you can relate to, is that you can't touch and feel the item you're purchasing. In this particular case, the quality of the leather is lovely. What we hadn't thought about until the boxes came was just how heavy the bags would be, even empty. Add to that the fact that they're pretty wide, and you can just imagine how comical it is every time I load mine up and try to get it to the car.

Ever since my days living in third story walk-ups, I've been the kind of person who tries to save trips by loading up both shoulders and carrying things in both hands as I'm packing, and with this overnight bag, a pillow, and my computer bag, I have, on a number of occasions, actually gotten stuck in a doorway. I feel like Winnie the Pooh, halfway in and halfway out. What's funnier than me getting stuck in a doorway is the fact that I don't learn, and this happens all too regularly.

All of this is a set up to inviting you to picture this happening to me not once, but twice on Wednesday. Every fall, my five favorite colleagues and I take a three-day retreat to a cabin in Little Sturgeon Bay. Someone who I was describing this to earlier this week said, "Oh, so it's a girls' weekend!" To be sure, we laugh until we cry, but even more than that, it's an intense experience for the five of us to be church together. To be able to tell the stories of ministry that we can't tell elsewhere to people who can relate. It's our chance to be vulnerable and hold one another accountable. Ostensibly, we share resources and plan Advent for our congregations, but even more, we provide a space for each other to grieve, to vent, and even to rage, all set to really, really good food and the crashing waves of the Bay.

This year, I was the second to arrive, and even though I had just laughed myself silly less than an hour before as I got stuck in the doorway at home with my oversize, too heavy travel bag, computer bag, bag of books, and pillow, I loaded myself up in the exact same way to get into the cottage. I swear, I must have looked like a cartoon burro with these mounds of gear all around me, as I wedged myself in the doorway. Some people cannot, or will not, learn.

Our host and I laughed as I practically bounced off the doorway and had to stand on the deck, peeling bag after bag off my neck. The reason this bears any mention at all is because of what happened next. Our third colleague pulled up about half an hour later. This friend has been struggling a lot lately, and one of her coping mechanisms is to over function – you know, when you're so deep in managing chaos that your only mode is taking care of everyone else? As she got out of her car, our host, who always keeps things neat as a pin, picked up a bag of garbage that she had uncharacteristically left sitting near the back door, saying, "I'm going to take the garbage out now, so that I have an excuse to help her in."

The Beatitudes

It was a grace to see. Someone being present for someone else who they knew wouldn't reach out for help. When I read our Gospel passage from Luke this Memorial Sunday, I wonder if it isn't things like this that Jesus was referring to when he said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." He wasn't saying, "Seek out reasons to mourn," just as he wasn't saying, "Try to be sorrowful and dour."

This year, when I read this passage, I think of my friend who has been struggling psycho-spiritually, and the fact that it was her struggle that inspired our other friend to lend her a helping hand. Maybe this is the blessedness in mourning and hunger and being excluded – that it provides a venue in which others can display God's grace to us. Perhaps the best real life example I've ever seen of this was written by Hugh Hollowell, Jr., a Mennonite pastor.

He wrote:

When my Dad died, I looked functional. But I wasn't OK. Not at all. And when the news got out, the ton of people flooding me with calls, and texts was overwhelming. I really couldn't function.

I sat on the swing in our yard and just stared into space. People called and asked what they could do to help. I had no idea.

"Well, anything you need at all, let me know, OK?"

"OK."

They hung up. I stared into space some more.

I had no idea what to do. What I needed. I didn't even know what to ask for.

Then a friend sent a text. This friend had met Dad once but didn't really know him. But still, she knew I was hurting. I saw who it was and almost put the phone down without reading the text, but I saw the message and it stopped me:

"Will you be home at 8:30 tonight?" it read.

What's weird is this friend lives 12 hours away from me.

"Yes," I replied.

"K."

Ten minutes later, she said, "Instacart will be there at 8:30. Open the door for them."

“What?”

Her response: “Grief Groceries.”

When Instacart showed up, they put two large bags of groceries on my porch. Frozen pizzas. Ice cream. Oreo cookies. Tinned soup. Stouffer’s lasagna. A gallon of milk. Like that. Things I could heat up if I needed a meal, or pig out on if I needed fat and sugar.

Notice she didn’t ask if I needed any food. I would have said no. She just asked if I would be home.

Grief groceries.

Another friend, who lives out of town, asked my wife to name a restaurant near our house where we like to eat. There is a local chain near our house that is sort of a deli. When we eat supper there, we spend about \$25. My wife told her the name of the place.

An hour later, there was a gift card in my inbox for \$250. Yes, that is a lot of money, and I understand not everyone can do that. But the wonderful thing was that because it was enough for multiple meals, we didn’t try to save it for “the right time.” We ate there that night, and got takeout from there several times a week for the next month on nights when I just didn’t have the spoons to cook.

Both of those gift-givers knew something I didn’t know – that when you are grieving, you don’t want to make decisions. No, that’s not quite it: You can’t make decisions. You hit decision fatigue really fast.

So, I guess what I’m saying is, don’t ask grieving people to make big choices or decisions. “How can I help” is a big choice. But “Can I take the kids this afternoon so you can have some time to yourself” is a much smaller one. “Will you be home tonight?” is a small choice. “What restaurant do you like” is a small decision. Just showing up to cut their grass because you noticed it needed cutting is loads better than asking, “Do you want me to cut the grass?” Or, “I’m going to Target. What can I get you while I’m there?” is better than “Can I run any errands for you?”

If you look, ways to be helpful will make themselves known. And in the first few days, especially, it helps to remove as many decisions from their plate as you can.

I think this is a real-life story of the Beatitudes, of how mourning and grief and all of the other vulnerabilities that Jesus mentions, open us up to being willing and able to receive

grace from one another as well as inspiring us to be agents of grace to one another. Furthermore, it sheds light on the woes that accompany the blessings in our Gospel reading. The common thread among the blessings is a vulnerability that can make us willing to receive from others in ways that we wouldn't be willing to do otherwise. Conversely, Jesus proclaims woe to those who are so self sufficient that they have no need for others. The flip side of being rich and full and others speak well of us, is that it is isolating.

Conclusion

We've come together today to celebrate the lives of nine beautiful souls, nine people who have touched our lives and who have left their fingerprints all over our lives and our community. One of the things that I say over and over to families as we prepare a funeral or memorial service is that being good to one another is the greatest legacy we can give to our beloved departed. May our memories of these nine people, and the souls of all of our beloved departed, be a blessing, and may we do right by them, and our beloved Jesus, by loving one another well.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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