

## **Grief and Gratitude —Living with Balance**

By Pastor Jim Duehring, Assistant to the Bishop

Several years ago, I came across this little citation by the author and psychotherapist, Francis Ward Weller. I liked it and saved it for future reference. Like many things I read and save, I don't immediately come back to them. But now, a few years later, I think it's time to reflect on Grief and Gratitude.

Francis Weller wrote:

"The work of a mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I only have gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which makes compassion possible."

These words strike me as being very realistic and theologically sound. We've all experienced a whole lot of grief during the past couple of years because of the pandemic. Some of you may have lost a job. Some of you may have lost a loved one to COVID-19. Grief can intensify our sense of differences. We compare losses and judge others. "My loss is greater than your loss."

But grief doesn't have to lead to cynicism and distrust of others. Grief can be seen as part of our common humanity. No one escapes this life without some pain and loss. Theologians speak of the theology of the cross. The cross shows us that Jesus intimately knew pain and loss. Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. Jesus experienced betrayal by his best friends. Jesus felt the sting of the whip and the crown of thorns thrust down upon his head.

The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." (Hebrews 4:15a NRSV)

The theology of the cross speaks honestly of the realities of sin and brokenness in our world. This sin and brokenness are not only experienced on the individual level but also on the systemic level. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now." (Romans 8:22 RSV)

The Hebrews speak of the pathos of God. God is moved by human suffering. God is with the children of Israel when they go down into slavery in Egypt. The Psalmist says, "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" (Psalm 56:8 NRSV)

The suffering of the Hebrews as slaves in Egypt was not meant to be interpreted only as a painful memory. Because of the experience of slavery and the experience of God's pathos and redemption, the Hebrews were charged to show compassion to the foreigner in their land. "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice...remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this." (Deuteronomy 24:17 NRSV)

Grief rightfully dealt with can lead to compassion rather than the lethargy of bitterness and despair.

Gratitude rightfully expressed can bear us up during times of grief and empower us to show compassion to others. Being thankful for discovering that new patch of blackberries doesn't have to mean you don't care about what's going on in Ukraine. Enjoying a good hearty meal doesn't have to mean that you are neglectful of those hungry in Afghanistan.

Eat, drink, be merry. Be grateful. Remember the source of all good things. The Lord God has given you blessings so that you might bless others. And yes, God can even redeem the things in life that you grieve and use you to be a blessing to others. Thomas Merton wrote of a Christian's capacity to be a "wounded healer." May that be said of us all be in the days ahead as we balance genuine grief with compassionate gratitude!

