



Lent 5, Year A – April 10, 2011

- John 11:1-45

A Homily preached by Elizabeth Craigie

Today on this 5th Sunday of Lent I'm going to talk about loss, and about compassion.

Two years ago I stood here and told about the grief Recovery Program that Lucile and I were offering out of our concern for the grief in our community. That has been going on ever since and the message is still the same; that we need to address the losses in our lives rather than ignore them and just try to soldier on. If it's worth saying, it's worth saying twice, as unambiguously as possible. If a loss which occurred in your life, one month ago or forty years ago, still causes you pain, please, please take steps to recover.

OK that's the harangue over, now I can be a bit more subtle.

All but the totally colour-blind will have noticed the insert in the service book today **BUT** now would not be the best time to read it. It is not there as a recruiting tool. I'm not saying you should use **this** program as a recovery guide - that is not so. I'm just encouraging you to do something. But what that leaflet has to say about grief is useful and I hope you would like to review it later, when you've forgotten what I say. One important thing to say right now, though, is that grief is not only about bereavement.

Lent is a time of self-evaluation. A time of repentance for our misdoings, so that we can be closer to being the people God has created us to be. I'm suggesting that this self-evaluation cover not only what we have done or not done but what has been done to us. The hurts that we did not ask for or instigate - our losses. These, too, can make us less than the best we can be as God's creatures. This is not to imply that loss and grief are blameworthy. On the contrary. Jesus didn't say to those who came to him in need; "This is happening because you're a rotten person. Serves you right". He simply met the need they had because they had come to him. His preaching was largely about the needy and disadvantaged being made whole. "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted".

Serious loss is when the bottom has fallen out of your world. Serious loss is when a thick glass wall seems to rise out of the ground behind you and you find you cannot go back through it. You can see where you were just walking but that is now the past and is receding ever further. Serious loss is a dark, chaotic presence that lives in your house, lets you get all cleaned up to go out and be seen in the world, and assaults you as soon as you return.

Serious loss is when you know the world will never be the same again.

If these pictures do not ring bells for you, I am genuinely glad for you and I hope they never will. But be assured that there are in this place people who know what I'm speaking of, because we've been there. And who know, though they may not yet have articulated it, that grief is a matter for the heart, not the intellect.

Unresolved grief is present when the old hurts keep hurting in the same old way.

And compassion sees your distress and touches you, and walks with you and does whatever it can to tend and comfort you.

Today's gospel is about loss and compassion, mixed together. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, friends whom Jesus loved, is getting sicker and sicker. People are worried and send to Jesus to ask him to come. They know by now that Jesus can rescue the situation. Jesus doesn't arrive. Now **we** know, because we

know the whole story, that Jesus has good reason not to come immediately. He is in danger if he comes near Jerusalem, he has other ministry to do, and, what's more, he knows Lazarus is not in permanent danger. But Martha and Mary don't know this. Imagine for a moment the anguished prayers; pleading with God, bargaining perhaps, and then just "God, please ----" And all for nought. Lazarus dies anyway. And Jesus is not there. It doesn't occur to them that Jesus can do anything now. In truth, would it have occurred to any one of us, living then?

Four days later Jesus arrives and Martha goes outside the village to meet him. "Lord if you had only come-----". Jesus says simply; "He will rise again." "Yes, yes, I know about the resurrection on the last day-----" "Martha! Do you believe in me?" The bottom line. And Martha, bless her, practical Martha, says "Yes. I do".

And goes to fetch Mary, who comes out weeping to where Jesus had stopped on the road and says; "Lord. If you had only come-----". Then Jesus weeps. He knows he is going to raise Lazarus, why weep for him? I think it is the grief before him that draws his tears. Looking at Mary weeping bitterly, he would see not only someone in great pain, but also someone in whom he longs to inspire faith enough to carry her through such trials. But she's not there yet. Instead she reproaches him. Now, still greatly distressed, he goes to the grave to command Lazarus to come forth. First he reminds Mary; "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?". And what would Mary think? "Oh no! I forgot! I didn't get it! Was it my fault he died?" And then Jesus shows them the glory of God by raising Lazarus. That simple. But nothing's ever simple, is it? It was awful for those four days when Lazarus was dead; the shadow of that will reappear when next they lose someone. And now their faith is deficient too. Yet this tangle of emotions that we call grief draws Jesus' compassion. Martha and Mary did not have to earn this compassion by demonstrating amazing faith. Sometimes we demand so much of ourselves in terms of worthiness, but God's accounting is quite different.

I wish I could believe that, had I been standing there, I would have understood that I was witnessing the embodiment of the glory and love and compassion and grace of God. But I doubt it. Some of us are pretty slow learners. The difference between us and them, of course, is that for them the man Jesus was there to perform miracles. That kind of miracle doesn't happen around us. When my husband, Peter, died 25 years ago, no-one brought him back to life. It's not an option now. We have to make our way through these hard things with a faith that is tested almost to breaking point and sometimes beyond. We long for the strong, loving presence that can make it well again, but can no longer conceive what that would look like. And yet God will be there, his compassion poured over it all. And we in turn may be completely unaware that God is tending our wounds, or rather, will fail to understand how and therefor assume that He is absent.

Remember the old hymn; "God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform." I can attest to that. God works within our hearts and also uses his people to do His work, sometimes in unlikely guises. Let us as grievors be ready to recognize God's messages and messengers and let us as God's people be ready to become God's messengers.

So I just have a list and a story to deliver.

First the list. I don't know how else to do this in the time available; pick one, or more.

Guiding principles for living in awareness of the grief in ourselves and in others.

Never, never stop praying; I can't emphasize that enough;

believe and expect that God is present;
practise awareness - awareness of God's world and of God's people around you;
practise compassion for yourself, and for others for you do not know what they are carrying;
evaluate offers of help for they may be from God;
acknowledge hurt and refuse to be ashamed;
do not believe that if you bury grief deep enough it will stay buried. It won't.
talk to someone you trust - there is amazing power in hearing one's own voice describing something painful that has been buried;
investigate what help may be available;
bear in mind that even when you are not aware of it God is there;
and remember that most of God's messages come not in blazing letters in the sky but through the still waiting in our hearts and in the words and actions of other people - his servants - us.

And, as God's hands on earth, remember the many of our number;
who are in pain, physical or emotional, and need our love;
the distressed who are off balance and need our understanding;
and the many who are lonely and need our companionship.

And now, I hope for your encouragement, a true story.

I was once approached by a colleague to join a Christian fellowship group she held in her home. I went, I must confess, reluctantly, as I was not at that time greatly in sympathy with any such activity. The format was one with which I had been familiar in my younger life, a format of hymn-singing, extempore prayer and personal testimony. When asked for an account of my Christian journey I said that I could really make no claim to faith at that moment. I had a few years prior to that, I said, experienced the traumatic death of my husband, which I had survived by my own effort, with no request for help from God, who I was not sure was there anyway. No offense intended, but that was how I felt.

Afterwards, as I was getting into my car outside in the still dark night, I was literally stopped in my tracks by the loud, vivid thought ; "Do you really think you would ever be left alone at a time like that? " And I knew right then and have known ever since that the answer was "No".

Amen