

July 7 Loss and Promise in the Family of God
 Genesis 23:1-4, 14-20

Today we read an all too familiar story. After many years together Abraham's beloved Sarah dies. Many of you have experienced the loss of a beloved spouse. All of us have experience the death of close family members. We know the ache of grief and the feelings of loss. A hole in the fabric of our lives has been created and we wonder how we will go forward, what the future will be like, and more. Every family experiences loss. When couples marry, they are not thinking about the fact that, if they keep the vows they are making today, this union will only end with the death of one of them. Yet, this is what they are committing themselves to when they say those words, "until death us do part."

Loss and brokenness is so much a part of our lives. Beyond the death of a loved one, we also experience other kinds of losses. Any relationship we are a part of experiences some brokenness. We deal with failed commitments, dashed expectations, broken promises and more. Some of these cause momentary disruptions to relationships, while others are permanent. We cannot escape the reality of brokenness and loss. But, there is also hope and good news. We encounter the paradox that in God's family, brokenness, however painful, can lead to new beginnings. All of us can think of examples where from the ashes of loss, in all of its forms, something new and perhaps even better has come forth.

Here is a truth that we don't always want to embrace. The more deeply we love, the more deeply we lose. It is risky to love someone. You are inviting great joy into your life, but you are also making yourself vulnerable. Some people, because of the pain of loss, choose never to get close to others again after it occurs. They don't want to go through that pain again. Hopefully, most people can celebrate the joy, goodness and love that comes through relationships and realize that in spite of the risk of loss, rejection, and more, it is worth it to embrace what God is giving them now.

Here is another truth. Some people feel that to openly grieve is a sign that they don't believe in the resurrection. So many times I have people apologizing for crying over the death of a loved one. They feel that it is wrong to show much outward grief. I

even have people tell me that they are a Christian and believe in eternal life so they shouldn't be so upset. Do you remember the story of Jesus and Lazarus? He was a good friend and died unexpectedly. When Jesus approached his tomb, what did Jesus do? He wept. He, who knew he was going to bring his friend back from the dead, still wept at the tomb. Loss and its pain is real. When we love someone a great deal we experience great pain at their loss. Even with our faith, believing that they have received eternal life, are free from pain and diminishment, we grieve, just like Jesus. So don't be afraid or ashamed of those tears. They are symbols of love.

Now an aside here, not shedding tears does not mean someone doesn't love the person whom they have lost. Some feel their grief in other ways. We just need to get rid of the idea that a stiff upper lip is the only proper way to handle grief. Instead, we need to embrace the pain, the feelings of loss. They are real. Abraham, after the death of Sarah spent time with her and, it says, he wept over her.

Since we all deal with loss we need to find a way for closure to happen. In the story we read today, Abraham goes about the purchase of a burial site for Sarah. It was a concrete action acknowledging that she was gone. One of the recent trends that concerns me as a pastor is that fewer people are having any type of service after the death of a loved one. I hear, "They didn't want one." I get why the person might not want a service but the family needs something. You don't have to have a formal church service but you should do something to help celebrate the person and acknowledge they are gone. Some families have gone to having a family get-together, others a potluck meal with stories. Some families have decided to raise money for a cause, or a bench and then gather to dedicate the bench or present the check. The Bible reminds us that it is important to gather, to weep a little, to share stories and acknowledge the loved one is dead. It brings emotional healing and allows us to move forward.

How we move forward is our next challenge. How do we deal with loss? If my loss is recent, am I able to reach out to God even if I have no words? Can I accept the love of God in this time of pain? Some people become angry with God because of the death of their loved one or the death of a relationship. Some don't feel comfortable

sharing their pain and grief with God in prayer. They wonder if God can understand what they are going through. Let God in and know God understands your concerns.

Think about those times of great grief in your life. How did you move forward? Did you move towards people or move away from others and isolate yourself? I run into examples of this second way of dealing with grief all of the time. The news is so different that they don't want to deal with it. By pulling back and isolating themselves they think they are coping. They believe that they are giving themselves time to grieve. What is really occurring is that they are freezing their life and emotions at a fixed moment in time. They become numb to life. Instead, when experiencing loss we need to be able to move forward and toward people and deal with the pain as we moved on to new life.

I recall my mother talking about that first Sunday after my father's funeral. He being a pastor and she the pastor's wife, church had always been a big deal for them. Even as his health went down he tried, every Sunday he could, to be in church. They sat in the same spot. Mom, thinking about the Sunday to come, wasn't sure she could go to church again. She thought about staying home. Then a friend called who had lost her husband a few months before and said, "I plan to sit with you at church today and then let's go out to eat." Knowing someone, who knew what she was experiencing, was waiting for her and that something special was going to happen afterwards got her over the hump. After that she went to church and each week it became a bit easier.

We don't get over loss. But given time the ragged edges of grief will heal. Even more, if we embrace the future, the grief will transform you. You may not like the journey you are on. You wish your loved one was still here, but you find out more about yourself, your faith and your resilience. And often, you find out that God has new surprises in store.

Abraham buys a burial plot. He sees himself as an old man at the end of life. Shortly we learn he marries anew, a woman by the name of Keturah and has more children and more living to do. We don't always find or want a new relationship, but we do find new and rewarding life if we are open to God.

Finally, find a support network to help you deal with the loss. This is one of the great gifts of Christian Community. We not only believe in the resurrection, we believe in helping one another in the challenging times of life. I see you rally around people when they are going through major illnesses. You are there for them when they experience loss. You are there when they need support and encouragement to step forth into new life. One of the greatest gifts we offer those who are going through loss is the love of the family of God. It is from this love that God is able to do a new thing.

So be aware of God with you in the times of loss. Move into the new, even in spite of the pain. Anticipate the new things God will be doing in your life and be willing to be surprised. And always be in community with others for them, when they need love and support, knowing that same support will be there for you.