

Helping others learn

Visiting the Houses of Mourning

By Laurie Newell

We are reminded of the scriptures that tell us “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.” (Eccl.7:2) and “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matt.5:4)

Visitation with pastor Jesus.

A young man in our church family died of cancer leaving his wife, Debbie with two teenaged children to mourn. At his memorial service a friend—Laurie Newell shared words, which left such a powerful impression on our congregation that I share them, in part, with you.

Debbie often testified, “God has changed my name” God did this primarily through suffering – the suffering of watching a husband and father battle cancer and die. She found that the suffering changed her personally and changed the relationship she and her husband shared. This marriage relationship became something especially sweet through shared suffering, a sweetness not many of us get to taste in this lifetime. As the suffering increased so did the intimacy and level of knowing each other’s heart and the heart of Jesus.

There are two ways we enter the house of mourning. Sometimes we enter, apart from our choice, for example, when grief and pain come upon us through personal tragedy like the lose of a loved one. There is another dramatic way that we meet grief and that is by choosing to enter someone else’s house of mourning and share their grief as our own. But who would choose such pain? Those who’s love and desire to know another’s heart overcomes the discomfort of sharing their pain. Is this not the essence of following the Christ who enters our world, and our lives at the point of our pain. He does this as a willing, empathetic pastor, priest. Will we choose that grief? Too often we turn away from the grief of others and try to ignore the sorrow of friends.

There is a powerful reasons why we might choose not to enter the houses of mourning. If we think back to the garden of Eden, and the temptation the serpent presented to Eve, there were three misguided beliefs. First, the belief that God isn’t really good and intends to withhold good from us. Second, the conviction that if we want good in this life, we are going to have to grab for it behind God’s back. We will have to use our own power to get what we want and need. Third, the hope that when God said that we would die if we rebelled against Him, was a bluff.

From the day of Eve’s failure to the present we have been trying to tell ourselves that death does not exist. Now of course we all know that we will someday die but we don’t want to see and hear the pain that death causes because we are trying desperately to pretend that

we and those we love will dodge the bullet. We don't want to think about what will happen if we are unable to dodge death. In other words, we avoid houses of mourning because we want to avoid reality itself; we like to avoid the reality of death because it speaks not only of pain, but of our own rebelliousness against God. We avoid the houses of mourning because we choose a fantasy rather than reality. We have no theology of suffering.

The benefits of entering the houses of mourning.

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man. "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure" (Eccl.7:4). If we are willing to face reality and if we want to be wise, we will choose to go to houses of mourning. But how will it benefit us to enter those doors?

Sharing the pain of others will bring us closer to Jesus. We describe some men as men of action, others as men of integrity etc. The way the Bible describes Jesus is as "a man of sorrows". He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We could translate this equally well as, "Jesus was a man of deep pain." That doesn't mean that Jesus was not also a man of joy – in fact, his enemies accused him of too much partying – too much going to houses of feasting. But along side the deep peace and joy, sorrow was a defining characteristic of Jesus' life. Sorrow is the godly response to both the sin and pain in this world. Jesus was grieved at people's sin; Jesus was also grieved at their losses. He wept at Lazarus's grave, knowing full well that he was about to remedy the situation with a miracle. If Jesus was a man of sorrows, and if we as Christians want to grow in his image, becoming more and more like him, then it follows that we will become more and more men and women of sorrow. Knowing him means walking with him in his joy and in his sorrow.

Sorrow and love go hand in hand. If we want to avoid sorrow, we will have a diminished capacity to love. The more we love those who mourn, the more of their sorrow we will experience. Their sorrow becomes ours. Sorrow is the spiritual erosion that works on our hearts, carving the channel that the river of love can flow through. If we've sorrowed little, the canyon is shallow. If we've sorrowed much, the canyon is deep and the amount of love that can flow from us is deep also.

We choose to go to houses of mourning to be one with Jesus, and to deepen our capacity to love. We also choose to go to houses of mourning because we chose to live in reality and face the truth that we yet live in a fallen world. In the place of false optimism, we may find the gift of God's true hope. Not a hope that we will get what we want on earth, nor a hope that we will have heaven on earth. We get to taste heaven here, but we also taste hell. The hope in houses of mourning is the hope of heaven in heaven, of that time when there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. But in this body of death, in this world of sin, in this age of darkness, we acknowledge reality by courageously entering the houses of mourning.

We choose to go to the houses of mourning to taste a special joy – A joy that does not require the absence of pain, but rather is able to co-exist with pain. A joy and peace that the world cannot take away even with the threat of death. Real peace is a place of rest, and it's hard to rest if we believe that all the good that is going to come to us is going to be attained by our own power. In facing the reality of death, we face the truth of our powerlessness. We can delay death at times, but we cannot prevent it. The peace in the houses of mourning is the rest that comes from acknowledging our lack of control and leaning back into God's arms, resting in the belief that He is good, and plans good for us, even when it seems that He is withholding it. It is the direct antidote to the sin of fear in the Garden of Eden.

We go to houses of mourning to see true courage modeled for us, giving us a vision of how faith is lived out. We choose to go to houses of mourning to have our faith encouraged, to see that God truly does comfort, to watch as a bereaved person finds a level of life that does not depend on pleasant circumstances. As we go to houses of mourning, we will experience pain, but what a wealth of gifts and blessings accompany that pain,

We choose to go to houses of mourning because there we are given the privilege of ministering to Jesus in his pain. Remember that He said, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." As he shared the shame and sorrow of others, so we know him as we move toward those who's shame and pain he bore. He hung alone on the cross but as his disciples we move toward that cross to be with him every time we enter a house of mourning.

Proper manners in the house of mourning.

If we are wanting to make the choice to go to one of the houses of mourning among us, but are unsure how you can help, just remember that the most important thing is showing up – being there. Not just today or over the next few weeks, but for the long haul. Avoid the temptation to fix things (remember that it is likely to be an expression of your own desire to pretend that death doesn't intrude.). Listen and weep. Be patient – long-suffering; at least a year of intense pain when there is the death of a family member. Sorrow will ambush the bereaved person at unexpected moments during the course of that year. Remember that a person can be at peace and in pain at the same time; in joy and in sorrow, have hope and grief. Don't take a week or two of relative smooth sailing as your cue to disengage. Share the pain and the gifts.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that choose to go to the houses of mourning.

Where is the house of mourning in your world today? Will you enter the houses of mourning with enlightened courage, faith, and an expectation to meet Jesus?