

When Congregations Grieve

A Lecture by Dan Moseley

As I sit here in Louisville on the balcony of the Rocking Horse Bed and Breakfast overlooking Third Street, my heart turns towards memories of loss. A cool May breeze it stirs my mind. "What should be said," I wonder, "to those ministers who deliberately choose to live a truth which the rest of the world denies?"

All ministry is interim. All life is interim. Perhaps life is in some way simply an interim space found between other interim spaces.

I guess I should begin with a confession. My liturgies always begin with a confession. It opens me to receive once I have confessed the truth about myself.

I have never been an intentional interim minister. Short or long, I always believed at the beginning of a ministry that it would prove permanent. What do I have to say to those people who have accepted the truth of impermanence from the beginning?

Maybe what I can do is share the change of sight that has come to me in my own life. Maybe those changes will help others see. I once thought that experience was the best teacher. Now, I don't think that experience teaches. I think it only changes the lenses in our glasses so that we can see differently. Some experiences help clarify our vision so that we can see with clearer focus. Others make us feel we are looking through someone else's glasses.

That is what happened to me. The lenses in my glasses were changed. I thought life was permanent. I didn't really. I had been a preacher for 30 years. I had lived with congregations where people came and went. I buried babies and octogenarians. I was intimately involved with a congregation where I saw programs conceived, born, nurtured, grow, blossom and die, only to be buried in the cemetery of glory days. I knew that things were not permanent.

But, at a deeper level I didn't know this at all. I discovered how blind the eyes of my soul were when in May of 1995, my wife of 31 years sunk into the deep silent sleep of death. When she breathed her last breath, I realized that I had been living an illusion. Somehow, even though I had prayed that she would be relieved from the cruel cancer pain which ravaged her, I didn't know what it was going to mean when she was finally free. I didn't know it meant that I, too, would be free. I discovered in a deeply personal way how impermanent life really is.

Now, as I sit here on this balcony, the sun beginning to burn through the clouds, I wonder, "Could this journey through death and grieving hold any seeds of promise for those who already know the truth that I have recently discovered? Could any thoughts I had during that journey inform the experienced and wise-the ones who know first hand the impermanence of life? Will my experience help

congregations understand themselves? Do congregations live with the same illusion I lived with? Could there be anything in this journey of loss and grief, which could help congregations?"

I know from experience that many congregations operate as if life were permanent. I know that people in congregations often live as if their pew-mate would be there next week. I know that they sometimes treat the priest in the pulpit as if she were always going to be there. Could it help them to see life through the lenses which have been placed in my glasses?

I don't know if the insights will help, but I can only give what I have received. So, I will share some of the things I learned and see if they illumine.

One of the things I learned is that life is loss. Life is a continual adapting to the reality of loss. Sometimes we work hard to keep what we have. Other times, we easily give up and lose something for something of more value. Nothing stays the same. Change is the one constant.

When we lose something, we grieve. To grieve is to accommodate to a new reality. It is the relearning of our world. It is a way of mourning the loss of something which has gone, learning to live without the person who is gone, envisioning the world in a new way, living into that new world and the receiving the identity that the new way of living requires of us. Whenever we lose someone who has been significant to us, we have to relearn our world.

We don't simply lose by premature death, we also lose by achievement. We lose dreams by achieving the dreams. I know people who have dreamed for years that they would one day get a PhD. When they finally got it, they were depressed for some time. The dream of the PhD was the driving force in their lives. To lose a dream by achieving it also requires that one grieve. I know congregations who have engaged in a new building program and there is high energy in the process. When they accomplish the task, the group goes flat, lacking any vision or driving force. They must grieve the loss of the dream.

Grieving is the most underrated and most important process for graceful living that I know. It is the process which enables persons to grow old gracefully. The difference between a person who is 89 and gracious and a person who is 89 and bitter is related to the way they grieve their losses. I sometimes wonder if that may be the way it is with congregations too. Congregations who grow old gracefully and welcome new persons and ideas into their life are the ones who know how to grieve their losses. The ones who become rigid and bitter are the ones who never accept the truth that the only constant in life is change.

So, who do we grieve our losses? How do we relearn our world?

I think it begins by naming the truth about the person who has gone. I learned when Cindy died that people may be our compass. They can be ones who orient

us to true north. I didn't realize it until she died, but Cindy was my true north. I was able to relate to the rest of the world because I knew what the constant was in my life. I think sometimes ministers are the "true north" in the congregation. Sometimes ministers are placed on that pedestal so that people know how to orient themselves.

I think that one of the roles of ministry is to help people with direction. Now, that doesn't mean that we necessarily tell people where to go. It doesn't mean that the minister is perfect. It simply means that congregations sometimes know themselves in relationship to the minister. For some it means that if the minister says it is true, it is true. For others it means if the minister says it is true, it isn't true. They will take the opposite position from their minister. I had a mentor who was active in the 60s with the civil rights movement. He spoke with conviction and courage on the issues of the rights of all people. The congregation centered itself around him. Some were against, others for. But, they oriented themselves around him.

So, congregations who lose a minister may lose their orienting center.

When we lose our orienting center, we become confused. I know when Cindy died I became confused. The boundaries that were created by my commitment to her suddenly collapsed. I no longer knew how to relate to others because I didn't have that commitment to her as the center. I remember talking to my therapist about my relationship with my children. I told him that I had some anxiety when I was with them. I didn't know why because I loved them and loved being with them. But, there was an unsettled feeling when I was in their home.

He suggested that it might be that I had never related to my children apart from my wife. Not that I had never been alone with them, but Cindy had always been in the picture. I always knew that if something came up that I didn't feel comfortable with, I could hand it off to her. I had to learn to relate to them as a single father.

I wonder if this is what happens when a minister leaves a congregation. Congregants may have related to each other, always knowing that the minister would be there to help. Now they have to deal with each other without the presence of an official important person. As an interim, you may walk in to the middle of a congregation relearning how to relate to each other.

Now, it is true that congregations are all different. They each relate in their own unique way. Some are pastor-centered. Others are more centered around a matriarch or a patriarch. Some circle around programs. Most have multiple centers. But, in most cases, the role of the pastor is central to their self-image and their self-understanding. When the pastor leaves, there is confusion. They have to learn to relate to each other differently.

When we are confused about our relationships, it can be frightening. I think that is what happened to me. I was afraid. I was afraid in my relationships with women. For 30 years I had related to women in a particular way. That way was bound by my covenant with Cindy. But, when she was no longer here, I didn't know how to interpret what the approach of women might have meant. Sometimes expressions of concern were simply that, loving acts of care. Other times they may have been overtures for exploring deeper relationships. I didn't know because I had not had this experience of seeing without the boundaries of a marriage covenant. It was frightening.

I wonder if those who walk into congregations where someone central has left find the same fear? I suspect they do. I believe that fear is a fundamental component to losing one's orienting center.

How do we overcome this fear? Fear is not overcome by exhortation. Love moderates fear. When we are afraid, information and encouragement can be helpful. Real fear can only be eased by the presence of someone who is not afraid.

I remember when my children were young. They would have nightmares. They would wake-up scared to tears. What was required to ease their fears was turning on the light so they could get information about reality, and the non-anxious presence of their mother or dad who held them and loved them.

Maybe this is what interim ministry is about. Maybe it is the presence of one who is not afraid. Maybe it is turning the light on in a dark room so people see more clearly the reality into which the congregation is moving.

If congregations are anything like I am, I suspect that they might have bouts of anger when their fear overcomes them. I remember soon after Cindy died, I was on the road a great deal of the time. I know now that I was running from my memories. I drove with the windows down, the moon roof open and loud, angry music screaming on the CD. I drove with my heart screaming louder than the piercing guitars of the Delbert McClinton Band. Anger colored the blood surging through my veins.

Loss creates threat. And when we feel threatened and frightened, anger is a normal response. Anger creates adrenaline, preparing the threatened body to fight or flee. My world had been shattered. I didn't know who I was. I was scared. So, anger at anything around me was my response.

Members of a congregation can be angry for similar reasons. They have lost their orienting center and feel threatened by that loss. Some of the anger gets focused on fighting. Sometimes we look for someone to blame and try to eliminate them. Some of our anger may drive us to distance ourselves from that which feels confusing. We isolate ourselves and pull away. Some members of the congregation may back away for a while or leave the congregation all together.

I know of one congregation where the minister left under painful circumstances. He was beloved in the congregation and there were accusations of sexual misconduct. After some time of conflict and disagreement in the congregation, he left. Some of the members pulled away and didn't attend anymore. Among those who left, there was a lot of finger pointing and confusing accusations. They were trying to sort out who was to blame so they could stabilize the situation and reduce the threat to their existence as a community. Anger is a normal response to a loss.

I don't think it is simply experienced when one has a loss against our will. Some divorced people I know who chose to divorce experience deep anger too. Their anger is also due to loss. Some of their loss produces fear because they don't have their orienting center anymore. If the relationship was strained and abusive, at least it was familiar. But, their anger is also because of lost dreams. Some divorced people I know are angry that they were not able to fulfill the vows that they had taken. They have lost an image of themselves.

I wonder if congregations may feel the same way. When the pastor is beloved, the loss is deep and profound. Sadness is central. Fear is deep because the congregation feels empty without his presence. Anger at being left without that presence is real. Even if the pastor who leaves is less than beloved, there is still a destabilizing effect that occurs. In both cases, something is lost. When some self-image is lost, it threatens our sense of self. Anger is almost always a response to the perception of threat.

So, I suspect congregations where interim ministers may visit often have a good bit of anger. This can be a difficult thing to deal with because anger is often denied. When it is denied, it can grow into an even more powerful force. Anger is not easily directed when it is denied. If we don't identify where our anger is properly directed, it might be projected on others. Members of congregations can begin pointing fingers at each other. The real focus of their anger may be on the previous minister, but it gets diverted.

Now, I think this may be an important factor that isn't dealt with very much. When ministers of congregations leave, some part of a congregation dies. If people don't mourn the event and name their anger, it can be directed at people in the pew with them, at the interim minister, or at the next minister who comes seeking a long-term relationship.

Interim ministers can help free people to express their anger by following the liturgy with the Psalms. God is greater than our anger or our love. One gift an interim may give a congregation is the freedom to express their anger at the loss they have experienced within the church and the losses they have experienced in all areas of their life. When people can name their loss, and work it through, they can be open to new life.

My therapist once said that grieving is simply the act of forgiving. Interim ministry is helping people forgive the past for not remaining as it was. It is forgiving the previous minister for not being able to keep things permanent. It is forgiving the congregation for not being able to create an unchanging, permanent and stable community on which we can all depend to always do things right.

The burden of loss may also account for the loss of energy in interim congregations. In my loss, I discovered that my emotions were very unpredictable. Sometimes I would be high with energy, charged and electric. Other times, I would be flat and weighted, the empty hole inside sucking out all the light and hope. The yo-yo emotional journey surprised me and confused those around me. No one quite knew how I might respond to the next crisis.

I wonder if this part of grieving might also be part of the confusing dynamics of congregations in transition. I have seen vital congregations go flat when they lose a pastor. I have seen them fluctuate between energy and hope on the one hand and lethargy and fear on the other. At one point they might feel they can take on the world, at another they might want to curl up in the easy chair of memory and do nothing.

Now, if this is what happens to people when we are grieving, I wonder, "What kind of person helps a congregation work through this time? What does a person or a congregation need to help them learn to live anew in the world? What needs to happen for them to move through this wilderness time to a new land of promise?"

Well, as I sit here on the balcony of my B&B thinking about what has helped me in my interim time, I remember sitting on this same balcony several years ago with a friend, who as it has turned out, was an interim minister to me. As a single person, I have learned that there is a kind of relationship known as a "transitional relationship." These are people who become important to us when we are in a wilderness space between the end of one relationship and the beginning of another. This friend and I sat on this same balcony and watched the fireworks on the 4th of July. What was it about that relationship which contributed to my healing?

I realize that this relationship was one that had a lot of history to it. I have discovered that many newly single people are attracted to people with whom they have history. I have learned that this is because they represent the world that has been lost. They are people who help us remember because they have known our lives as they were lived before.

I wonder if this isn't a critical piece of interim ministry. Memory is a much-maligned resource in our time. We live in a culture which exhorts us to "get over it." There is an assumption in the western culture that the future is the power. We have a history of moving west when there is a problem. Move to a new church. Leave the past behind and step boldly into the future.

While it is true that vision and hope are the energy which seduce us into a new future, my experience has helped me be more sensitive to the power of the past. I have discovered that the life of what has gone before has far more power than some want to admit. Intense and meaningful relationships tattoo us. We are stained permanently by previous relationships. Ask any one who has been abused. Ask anyone who has lost a child. Ask anyone who has lost a sister or a spouse or partner. We are forever shaped by that which has been a part of our lives.

Now, knowing this, we have to deal with it. Washing off the tattoo is not possible. And it isn't desirable. To erase memory is to leave a person a hollow shell. Alzheimer's is not something that people desire.

Memory is a desirable part of who we are because it contains the resources from our past which can fuel our future. The past is powerful. When it doesn't get remembered, it is even more powerful. One of the things my transitional relationships have taught me is embodied in the words of one as we broke up. "I can't be Cindy for you."

As hard as it was to hear, it was true. After that I was driven into the deep hole of grief where I was forced to face the pain I feared the most - deeply remembering my previous life. It was too painful because to remember was to feel the pain of loss more deeply.

I have since discovered that deep remembering reduces the powerful illusions of the memory. It helped me to put my previous life into a realistic perspective. It helped me see that my relationship with Cindy was human and broken. It helped me see that it was in its very human and broken state that it offered me life and joy. Only as I allowed my memory and my tears to flow was I able to see more clearly the new relationships as human and broken, healing and nurturing.

I have heard more than one minister complain, "I can't be the minister who was here 25 years ago. His ghost still lives on and does not leave room for me." I believe that powerfully intense relationships must be remembered. They must be rehearsed till they lose their power to haunt the present with controlling power.

It seems to me that maybe one of the primary things an interim minister can do to help a congregation grieve itself toward new life is to visit members and help them remember. Celebrate with the congregation all the memories of the past. Preach sermons which lift up the stories of the congregation and its memory. Place those stories in the context of the greater stories of faith.

Don't avoid painful stories. Past pain teaches as much about life in the future as past pleasure. Healing memory can help clear the lenses of the glasses through which we look at the past so that we can see it for what it really was. By facing the

painful parts we can seek to adjust our lives so as not to repeat them. By remembering the joyful parts, we can open ourselves to new joy.

There were other kinds of relationships which come when our lives change. I met new people who didn't know me in my previous life. I remember one in particular who didn't know me when I was a pastor or when my children were at home. He is a colleague who has known me only as a professor and as a single guy.

He offers me a couple of gifts for which I am deeply grateful. He offers me fresh space in which to speak my past. When I tell him about the past, it is what I say it was. It isn't mixed with his knowing my past. With people like this I can tell my stories from my past that I believe help them know me for who I am.

Maybe that is one of the functions of interim ministers. They can sit and listen to the stories of the community and allow the community to recreate itself in a new light. Of course there will be a distortion. But every dream of the future is grounded in what we remember of the past. Any dream that has any chance of becoming a reality is grounded in either pain or pleasure of the past events of our lives. A person who does not know our past can help us live into our dream of what we might become. They don't know enough to tell us that we can't do that because we have never done that before.

New friends also give us new mirrors to see ourselves in fresh ways. Each of us is a mirror for the other. When we speak or act, the eyes of another tell us how they saw what we did. New ears will hear different voices speaking within us. We are all a collection of voices which seek to be known and accepted. New friends can respond to different voices they hear in us and invite those voices to be a more powerful part of the character of our lives.

Maybe this is one of the gifts of an interim minister. Maybe it is to mirror back parts of the congregation which have not been seen or celebrated. I know that frequently interim ministers are able to hear voices of persons in the congregation which the previous minister didn't hear. New people are able to see possibilities in us that old tired eyes can't see. Familiarity is wonderful because it can feel good, but virgin sight is also able to help us see ourselves as new and different people.

Now, I am not suggesting that interim ministers will be able to make congregations new. I think the past is the only thing any of us has to work with. We are only able to fashion our future with the materials available to us. Within each person and within each congregation are multiple voices and gifts that have never been seen nor utilized. The new hearing and the new sight brought to a congregation by an interim minister might mirror to them the possibilities that have been hidden under the comforter of familiarity.