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Today’s scripture reading encompasses a lot of endings: the end of Moses’ life, obviously. But also the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the “second law.” The end of the 5 books comprising the Jewish law, which are known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. The end of Israel’s founding events: exodus, wandering and promise. And the end of the writings commonly attributed to Moses. With the caveat that this account of Moses’ death points pretty clearly to the existence of an editor, if not a different author altogether.

And yet, even as this passage marks so many conclusions, so too does it usher forth a time of new beginnings. For, before his death, Moses laid hands on Joshua, signaling a change not only in leadership, but in purpose. A new phase in Israel’s history, which leads right into the first chapters of the book of Joshua, where Joshua is commissioned and the people enter into the land long promised to them by God and recently previewed by Moses. In the narrative that follows, the people will move out of formation mode and into fulfillment, out of preparation and into the struggle toward obedience. Thus, Chapter 34 is pivotal: It is both an ending and a beginning.

But is that really so unique? To have an ending and a beginning correspond so closely? Well, actually, maybe not. In the case of a death or a departure, there is the before—or the during--time and there is the after time. The after time is new. As are our identities in the after time. We knew who we were *with* that departed person, but who and how are we without his or her voice, presence, or influence? That must be negotiated and lived into...over time. Which requires both patience and grace.

The opposite is also true: Beginnings, no matter how joyful, mark both a start and a finish. A wedding is, of course, the celebration of a new, more deeply committed phase in a relationship. But as bachelor and bachelorette parties attest, wedding can also be characterized as formal farewells to the supposedly carefree single life. Similarly, even as a baby is joyously welcomed into the world at birth, his or her parents must also say good-bye to their lives as “just” a couple in order to segue into life as an expanded family unit. And, much later, when that child experiences the new beginning of heading off to college for the first time, his or her parents will be left with an empty nest to mourn and eventually embrace as a new beginning for themselves and their matured relationship. The reality is our lives are filled with losses we somehow manage to negotiate and live into. And not simply births, deaths, graduations, weddings, and divorces.

When I was preparing to move here from Colorado almost two years ago, I confessed to a friend that I was experiencing anticipatory grief over leaving behind my home and friends of almost 12 years. “You shouldn’t think of it that way!” she insisted. “That’s not grief!” With all the exciting things that were happening in my life, how could my emotions possibly add up to grief? After all, I was about to live into the vocation to which I believed God had called me: I was moving into another extremely beautiful part of the country to begin life as an ordained person, a pastor and teacher. I was about to be welcomed into a new community and a new church family. I was about to move out of a crowded townhouse and into a free-standing house with a yard somewhat larger than the current postage stamp sized garden. Surely this was a time for celebration, not mourning! If anyone should be grieving, it was the people who were being left behind to live their same-old, same-old lives... We were both right: It was both/and, a time for me to rejoice...*and* to grieve.

I think part of the confusion arises out of the fact that there are many situations we don't openly understand or acknowledge as losses or occasions to grieve. And, even when we do, our society isn't necessarily structured in a way that permits us adequate time and space to properly mourn. You may have noticed that, after Moses' death, the Israelites took a full 30 days to grieve. Customarily this was a time of silence: A time where there were no distractions, nothing to do or say, but to face one's sense of loss head-on. Today some Jewish people will formally mourn by sitting Shiva for 7 days. But many Reform and other Jews will only take 3 and sometimes just 1 day. I believe most workplaces will designate a week or so of paid leave for a death in the immediate family. When it comes to extended family members, that is reduced to 2 or 3 days at most. It seems we must be as efficient in our grieving as we are in our working.

The other issue is that, perhaps as a result of the Puritan roots in this country and in our denomination in particular, emotion has been largely relegated to private times and spaces. Whereas lamenting and wailing are Jewish ritual traditions, we tend to limit our public grieving to funerals and then we try to get on with it...or at least to *appear* to be getting on with it. When and if we slip, we may wish we hadn't. After a break-up a few years back, I spent a Sunday morning in church with uncontrollable tears flowing like a faucet. No one except my pastor knew what to do. Most people simply pretended they hadn't noticed or anxiously scurried away. But, as I learned from a friend who lost her 25-year old son to cancer and another who lost her young husband in a freak accident, it could have been worse. Familiar, well intended phrases like, "He's in a better place now," were not only unhelpful to them, but hurtful, as though something had been wrong with the lives their loved ones had been living with them before death came calling.

I would like to think that church is one of the best, most appropriate places for us to bring our whole selves, joys and sorrows alike. Where we can be open about where we're at and be embraced wherever we are on life's journey and on the spectrum of human emotion. I would like to think it is a place where comfort and support and, in due time, healing occur... This church does a fairly good job of that. It's somewhat easier and more natural as a church that is a family size and style, as opposed to a larger, more corporate type of church. For us, perhaps the greatest challenges come when there are situations we ourselves don't even recognize as losses. That said, I'd like to introduce you to six major types of loss, many of which can and will overlap.

Not surprisingly in this materialistic culture in which we live, material or physical losses are among the most widely recognized: We may lose a barn in a fire, a car in an auto accident, a ring down a drain. The key here is that, on some level, the lost objects are replaceable. As adults we have a better perspective on these losses, knowing that our possessions are indeed expendable in a way that other things are not. For a child, a replacement for the beloved, lost teddy bear may not be at all acceptable.

Which leads me to the second type of major loss, also very familiar: relationship loss. Death, of course, is the ultimate permanent relationship loss. But, if we're talking about the loss of opportunities to touch, relate to, be in physical and emotional relationship with, and know oneself in relation to a particular person, that encompasses a whole host of situations, including but not limited to divorce, moving, job changes, or changes in a friendship. Relationship losses can be permanent or temporary, full or partial.

Intrapsychic loss is the third type of major loss. This is the type of loss we associate with the death of a dream. It is the experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself or plans for a particular future. It is the “what might have beens” and our changes in perception.

Intrapsychic loss might be caused by a death or a divorce, but not always. A newlywed couple will have their first argument and be forced to face the fact that their relationship is not perfect after all. A long-term goal may be joyously accomplished only to be replaced by a sense of loss. In fact, astronaut Buzz Aldrin admitted to feeling this way after setting foot on the moon. A young dancer may dream of performing professionally, only to see her hopes dashed by a serious injury.

That dancer would also be experiencing the fourth type of major loss: functional loss. We encounter this kind of loss when our bodies change through injury, illness, or aging; and we lose a major physical or neurological function. Our vision or our hearing might be compromised. Our memory might not be what it once was. We may only be able to move about in the world with the help of a walker or a wheelchair. Consequently, there is a loss of autonomy and independence as well. Although expected in old age, these losses may be experienced just as powerfully at 75 as at 25. Functional loss is functional loss and, unlike material loss, frequently it represents a permanent loss.

The fifth type of loss is role loss. Clearly role loss will be the experience of someone who has been widowed and must re-enter life no longer as part of a couple, but as a single person. A person facing a lay-off can no longer find his or her day-to-day identity in their job... But role loss can also occur as a result of positive accomplishments. When we graduate and move into the world of work, we lose our identities as students. When I was ordained, I lost my lifelong

identity as a layperson. Role losses, whether positive or negative, can leave people feeling disoriented. They no longer know what role to play and, in some cases, practically need to start over from scratch.

The sixth and final type of major loss is systemic loss. We all belong to interactional systems, which develop patterns and norms of behavior over time. When a component of that system shifts, serious changes may result and be experienced as losses. For instance, when a co-worker leaves for a new job or a new person is hired, the relationships between the other workers are likely to change significantly. Recently empty-nested parents may not know quite how to function as a system that is missing some of its key players. A chaplain friend of mine recently moved from an old hospital building into a new one, filled with hope and excitement for all the upgrades and improvements it represented, only to discover once the move was complete that the change of the physical plant and its systems also impacted the relational systems between colleagues, and not necessarily in positive ways.

It may go without saying that *this community* has experienced a lot of these losses over the past couple of years. That some people are still reeling from these losses. That some of these occasions have been better marked than others. The good news is that it's not too late. For the other thing about grief is that it cannot be relegated to a single timetable or progression of steps. Styles and durations of grief are as individual as we are. However, when we don't acknowledge or ritualize the presence of loss and grief, we risk prolonging and complicating it in ways that can be unintentionally damaging to ourselves as individuals and as a community.

In two weeks we will observe All Saints Day with a candle lighting ritual. We will remember our members and friends who have died in the past year and beyond, lighting candles for each of

them. I would invite you to ponder this ritual over the coming days and consider whether there might be other endings you would like to mark by lighting a candle. You may name those losses aloud or not, as you choose... Although extremely simple in execution, rituals like this one can be surprisingly powerful in the emotions they elicit and in the opportunities they provide for personal catharsis and healing.

As helpful and as healing as rituals can be we will still need to exercise grace and patience with one another. For even after we believe we have done the bulk of our work around any or all of these losses, a sense of grief can be rekindled by an anniversary or other milestone. The fact is, like it or not, we live with some manner and degree of grief and loss day in and day out.

Thirty days of formal mourning prepared Joshua and the people of Israel to release their remarkable leader of 40 years. To enter a new home and embrace renewed life and dreams in the Promised Land of Canaan, where, of course, new challenges would also await them. But the loads they carried were a little lighter. For they'd gotten a head start on their grieving process. And they were able to move forward across the Jordan with God's unique vision for them as a people intact.

Amen.

Six Major Types of Loss from Mitchell, Kenneth R. and Herbert Anderson: *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983.