



TO LOVE WHAT DEATH CAN TOUCH

November 4, 2018, All Saints Day (observed)

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

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“’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” I first heard this line many years ago. I was in the kitchen cooking dinner and looking out the window on a gray autumn evening, growing both darker and colder. *All Things Considered* was playing on the radio when I heard this line, “’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” It was described as being found engraved on an old tombstone in a graveyard in New England.

Often on All Saints Sunday we talk about God’s response to death, the gift of the resurrection. But what about our response to death? “’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” The line has always stuck with me. Years later I learned it was a line from a poem by Yehuda HaLevi, a Jewish physician, poet and philosopher of the 11th and 12th century. I also later learned that the next line of the poem is this, “A fearful thing to love, to hope, to dream, to be – to be, And oh to lose.”

It was these lines of poetry that turned a Biblical text at which I had always scoffed into a powerful testimony. This text at the conclusion of Job, that we just heard Holly read, always feels like a Disney-fied addition tacked on to ensure a happy ending to a tragic story. When most of us think of the story of Job, we are left to grapple with the hard truth that faithfulness does nothing to promise us immunity from the suffering that is all too present in this world. We understand completely, after having lost everything, why Job eventually speaks out in anger towards God for all that has befallen him. In the text we learn that after God responds to Job’s complaint, Job apologizes and Job and God kiss and make up. “And the Lord



restored the fortunes of Job” and not only that but “the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.” New riches, new children. No harm, no foul!

But not really. Most certainly, not at all. Job knows, as do we, that all those brothers and sisters who are now breaking bread with him were nowhere to be found when he was suffering. And yes, he is blessed with seven sons and three daughters. But no one can begin to believe that new children erase the trauma of the deaths of his previous children.

After all Job has lost and after being lectured by God about how little he truly comprehends, would we have blamed him, if in Chapter 42 he finally took his wife’s advice from earlier in the story, and cursed God and died? But somehow Job chooses to step forward into yet another chapter of his life; chooses to love God despite all that has happened; chooses to invest his heart and soul once again in those around him.

On the outside it may look quite similar to his previous life, but it could not be more different on the inside. In his previous life, all of his good fortune, all that brought him joy and happiness and satisfaction rested on a foundational belief that his goodness ensured the blessings he had received. His faithfulness, like an amulet around his neck, guaranteed the continuity of all he had. There may be children once more, and herds of animals, and servants, but what will never return is that sense of security. Job will never be able to assume that all that brings his life joy and meaning cannot be taken from him in an instant. For the rest of his days he will live with what one psychiatrist calls “the infinite web of what-ifs.”

Of course, all of us live with this fear of loss in our lives, this “infinite web of what-ifs.” And what’s more, we live with the aftermath of actual loss and mourning. On this All Saints Sunday, as we remember those we have loved and lost, that loss is tangible and very real, a metallic taste in our mouths that lingers, that flavors our days and our lives. Very few of us experience as much traumatic loss as Job, but we all experience loss and we all carry the specter of potential loss with us.



We all have a choice as to how we respond to loss and the potential for loss. Some of us seek to shelter ourselves from potential tragedy and loss. We choose to not invest too much of ourselves in this life, in our relationships, in our hopes and dreams for the future. We have been burned before in one way or the other and we feel the safest course of action is to not have too much to lose, to not give too much of ourselves to anyone or anything.

And then there are those of us who are the Charlie Browns of the world. No matter how many times we charge that football ready to kick it with all our might, only to have Lucy whisk it away and finding ourselves flat on our backs. Then we get up, dust ourselves off, and do it all over again. We experience loss, we fall down, and we rise to risk again, in matters much deeper than playground hijinks.

The vast majority of us do a little of both, some protecting and some risking. The writer Willa Cather wrote, “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened.” And in each of these stories, our stories, the ones that shape our lives, there is loss along the journey. One of the ways the stories diverge is the way in which we respond to loss. Can we find a place beyond the suffering to praise our God? With the deep reality that there are no guarantees, can we risk offering ourselves out into the world once more?

The bottom line is we can and we must. There is no blessing without risk. There is no hope without risk. There is no love without risk. HaLevi was correct. “’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” But this indeed is the place to which God is calling us and we have no choice.

All Saints, along with reminding us of what has been lost, reminds of what has been given to us and, more important, who has been given to us. “The one who laid the foundation of the earth, the one who commanded the morning...and caused the dawn to know its place, the one who has the wisdom to number the clouds...” (Job, Chapter 38, selected verses), this one, eternal and boundless, descended to speak



with the likes of Job. And not only that, this one descended and took on human form, in Jesus Christ, to understand what it is to be touched by death; to die on the cross. This one mourned as one who has lost a beloved Son. This one continues to descend to journey beside us through every risk and loss in our lives.

Everyone and everything that death can touch, God has, and is, and will continue to envelope in everlasting arms. And finding a home in God's everlasting arms, everyone and everything is welcomed into eternity. This radical and world-changing truth invites us to a place beyond fear. And this most important of all truths is the bedrock upon which we are invited to stand in every season of our lives, rain or shine, regardless of what may come. Even when loss strikes us down, we can once again rise up.

When those original disciples were broken beyond all repair, in the aftermath of Jesus' death, two of them made their way to Emmaus. A companion joined them on that journey, talking to them of the immense power of God's love. When they gathered at the end of the day, weary and worn, and wrung-out from sadness, that companion, took bread, and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Jesus Christ, alive once more, was present with them. Those disciples' hearts burned, and they shook off their weariness. They rushed back to share the Good News. And they never stopped sharing it. They risked everything they had to be witnesses, in the midst of a world of death, to the everlasting life only God's all-powerful love can provide.

Today we are called to be these disciples; to ever be a witness to life and eternal life. We are called to risk loving again and again, in the very face of death, as we hold on to the promise we receive at this table.

May none of us face the traumas of Job. But when we do face suffering and loss, we are called to turn toward our God with our sadness and anger and hopelessness. And ask God to give us the strength to go back out into the world with loving hearts.



Today, among the names of the beloved read in our remembrance of those who have died, are Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax and Irving Younger. These are the names of those killed in the massacre in Pittsburgh last weekend. So very much has been lost. But the Tree of Life Synagogue will continue to gather and worship. As Rabbi Jonathon Perlman of the New Light Congregation, which also worships in the Tree of Life Synagogue, said on CNN, “What happened will not break us...It will not ruin us...We will continue to thrive and sing and worship and learn together.”

Yesterday, Kim and I worshipped at Park Avenue Synagogue. They warmly welcomed us into a holy space that mourned, but also hugged and sang and danced and prayed together with joy, loving each other and loving their creator. And so shall we.

So get a running head start and try to kick the football. Each in our own way, in the face of each of our own losses and fears, let us offer our hearts recklessly to the world, risking much, but trusting even more in the one who creates, redeems and sustains us on each new day. Let us be disciples of the one who lost it all to rise again. It is surely true, “’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.” But ‘tis also surely true that we are ever held in the arms of the one who is even more powerful than death.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



Cole Jr., Allan Hugh, *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008, page 125.