

“Torn By Grief”

2 Kings 2:1-12

During the last 3 months of 2023, Bill Schiffer was in the hospital most the time. Like many of our elderly, he was fighting congestive heart failure that causes other complications.

During some of my hospital visitations, his daughter, Cheryl was there always wearing blue jeans with big tears in them. Cheryl’s teenage daughter was with her the first time I gave her grief for being too fragile to buy new jeans. She assured me they were new jeans.

Her daughter was laughing, and her father was shaking his head, holding up his hands, and shrugging his shoulders. I know that women pay big bucks for brand-new, worn-out jeans.

When it came time to grieve Bill’s death, to fill our sanctuary for his funeral, Cheryl asked me if I’d recognize her without wearing torn jeans. She did look a lot different in a black dress.

Whether it’s wearing torn jeans or wearing the grief that always comes when being torn away from a parent when he or she dies, we can be mended if we want to be. We may not want our jeans mended, although my grandma always mended, patched my jeans when they wore through from baling hay and straw – mending our grief on the other hand is a healthy activity.

Coming up for prayer today can help mend your grief. Being matched up with one of our Divinity Stephen Ministers can help mend your grief. It always takes time to mend our grief.

In Second Kings, a prophet named Elisha is torn apart by the departure of his mentor Elijah. As the story begins, the two men are on the road outside Gilgal, near the Jordan River. Elijah knows that his prophetic work is coming to an end, so he tries to separate himself from Elisha. Elijah says to his younger colleague, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha says, “I will not leave you” (2:2).

They continue down the road to Bethel, where they run into a company of prophets. Once again, Elijah tries to break away, but fails. The two walk to Jericho, and again Elijah tries unsuccessfully to leave Elisha behind.

Then the two men, followed by the company of prophets, proceed to the Jordan River. Elijah takes his mantle, which is a cloak made of cloth, rolls it up, and strikes the water. The water is “parted to the one side and to the other” (v. 8), reminding everyone of the parting of the Red Sea, when Moses led the Israelites out of captivity. It also brings to mind the journey through the Jordan River when Joshua led the people into the promised land.

In the history of Israel, this is a *good* kind of tearing: Opening the water so that the people can pass through.

Once on the other side, Elijah says to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha says, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit” (v. 9). What a beautiful request this is. Elisha is not asking to inherit Elijah’s money or property. He’s requesting a double share of the older prophet’s spirit. He wants to be seen as Elijah’s heir and to continue his powerful work in the world.

Elijah answers that the request is a tough one to grant. But he says that “if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you” (v. 10). In effect, he is saying that the LORD will make it happen if God allows Elisha to see his mentor’s departure.

And this is exactly what happens. A “chariot of fire and horses of fire” (v. 11) separate the two, and Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind. This sets him up to meet with Jesus and several disciples in the transfiguration, along with the great lawgiver Moses.

Elisha watches the ascent of Elijah until he passes out of sight. Then Elisha grasps his own clothes and tears them into pieces. In the world of the Bible, tearing one's clothes is a sign of mourning, grief and loss. He is torn apart by the departure of his mentor, unsure of what kind of mending will come his way.

We know what Elisha is feeling, don't we?

Each of us has come to a crossroads like this. It happens, for some of us, when we leave home and join the military. Or start our freshman year at college, move to a new city for a job, or find ourselves suddenly out of work. It happens when we get married, divorced, or lose a spouse just as we're getting ready to enjoy retirement. It happens when we visit the doctor hoping for relief, only to receive a life-altering diagnosis. It happened when Dorothy and her family knew they were losing Bill.

All are crossroads. All involve loss. All can lead to the tearing of clothes.

A woman named Kate Bowler had a husband, a child and a position at Duke Divinity School. Then she discovered, at age 35, that she had stage four cancer. This was a crossroads for her. It involved the loss of what she thought was a life of "infinite choices and unlimited progress."

From her hospital room, she wrote, "I see no master plan to bring me to a higher level, guarantee my growth, or use my cancer to teach me. ... Nothing will exempt me from the pain of being human."

That's true, isn't it? Suffering is a part of human life. To cover pain is to deny that Jesus had nail marks in his hands, even after he was raised to new life. To downplay struggles is to pretend that Jesus never left the lofty transfiguration mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. The fact is, Jesus came down the mountain and said that he would "go through many sufferings and be treated with

contempt” (Mark 9:12). And as soon as he reached the valley, he was called on to drive an evil spirit out of a boy.

The work of visible mending is done in a series of stitches. First, we allow ourselves to enter into the pain of others. Several decades ago, just 10 days after his 24-year-old son was killed in a car accident, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin delivered a sermon to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City. He thanked them for the flood of letters that had followed his son’s death, including one that carried a wonderful quote from Hemingway: “The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places.”

“My own broken heart is mending,” said Coffin, “and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if in the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength.”

The second stitch of visible mending is the offering of love that transmits strength. Coffin discovered for himself that when a terrible tragedy broke him, the Christian community stepped in to fill him with love and strength. And he no doubt became a better pastor after experiencing that work of repair.

Most of us realize that the strongest and most beautiful people around us are those who are not ashamed of their mending. The parents of an autistic child who give valuable guidance to others in the same situation. The AA sponsor who patiently helps a fellow alcoholic remain sober. The survivor of abuse who provides a lifeline to those who are being abused. The wife of an Alzheimer’s patient who offers support to families dealing with various types of dementia. Our Stephen Ministers including our 3 new ones, Sandy, Randy, and Tracy about to be commissioned who respond to our people in need.

None of us can escape the pain of being human. In every life, there will be rips and tears, some small and some very big. Fortunately, God is with us, helping us do the work of visible mending. In Second Kings, Elisha picks up the mantle of Elijah and returns to the bank of the Jordan River. He strikes the water with the mantle, and the water parts again. When he crosses the river, the company of prophets says, “The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha” (2 Kings 2:13-15).

The third stitch of visible mending is the continuation of the faithful work of people who have come before us. When we pick up the mantle of a mentor, we do not make them invisible. Instead, we carry their spirit forward. For Elisha, the mantle of Elijah becomes the symbol of God’s visible mending.

At the end of her book, *No Cure for Being Human*, Kate Bowler thanks her heroes, the family members and friends who supported her and prayed for her throughout her cancer treatments. She says that the “ability to work throughout this illness made my life not simply bearable, but beautiful.”

When we allow God to work through us, as he worked through Elisha, we are part of God’s visible mending. When we enter into the pain of others, showing a love that transmits strength, we become the kind of heroes who helped William Sloane Coffin, Kate Bowler, and allow Divinity families who are grieving. When we remain faithful and prayerful in the face of losses and disappointments, we patch together a life that is not simply bearable, but beautiful.

May the peace of God . . .

#315 – How Good, Lord, to Be Here