

The Possum

II Corinthians 5:16-21

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The Possum

Will you pray with me? God, we cry out to you. We need your strength and comfort. In the midst of our grief we question everything that once felt certain. God carry us on our way out of the darkness. Be ever present as we mourn our losses. Restore in us a hope that surpasses all understanding. In our lament, we seek to understand your ways which seem so foreign to us. God, show us anew the depth of your love and embrace us as we continue on this narrow path. Let us move one more day closer to you. Amen.

I've always found the possum to be an odd creature. When threatened or harmed, they will "play possum", mimicking the appearance and smell of a sick or dead animal. The lips are drawn back, teeth are bared, saliva foams around the mouth, and a foul-smelling fluid is secreted from the anal glands. The physiological response is involuntary, rather than a conscious act. Their stiff, curled form can be prodded, turned over, and even carried away. Many injured possums have been killed by well-meaning people who find a catatonic animal and assume the worst. The best thing to do upon finding an injured or apparently dead possum is to leave it in a quiet place with a clear exit path. In minutes or hours, the animal will regain consciousness and escape quietly on its own.

This creature is odd to me because it instinctively renders itself unconscious in the midst of danger. Where most creature prepare an aggressive defense at the sight of danger the possum simply mimics death. In looking at Christian death, one can see that the possum is a relevant analogy. Like a possum, Christians who have passed on seem dead to us, but they are indeed alive. As much as this sounds like a children's moment illustration I think we need to take a deeper look at what we see in life, death, and the role of the possum.

This subject is not easy to swallow, but I think life is like a grand story being told one day at a time. Today, we are learning to be storytellers. The story we will learn to tell is one of reconciliation. On the subject of writing a novel or telling a story, Robert Fulghum suggests that you keep this creed close by as you write:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.
That myth is more potent than history.
That dreams are more powerful than facts.
That hope always triumphs over experience.

That laughter is the only cure for grief.
And I believe that love is stronger than death.¹

The story we are writing today is our own, each with its own understanding and its own experiences. This church is in the midst of grieving many losses. In 2007 thus far, this church has lost seven of its members. At this time our imaginations and our emotions are stronger than our knowledge. At this time our dreams of the unknown are more powerful than the facts. The first part of this creed tells a truth about our humanity. We can know infinite knowledge, history, and facts and still be overwhelmed by the voice of conscienceness. Our imagination, our myths and our dreams easily out weigh the truth we know. The second part of this creed points to the positive aspects of this voice. Hope, love, and laughter can conquer over our experiences, even grief and death. This sort of thought is hard to swallow, though, in the midst of our grieving. As patriarchs and matriarchs of our congregation pass on, we are left with the task of understanding life in the midst of death. How do we move from these intense emotions and questions of faith that we are feeling back into the story of reconciliation with God?

One of the first things that happens as we recover from grief is a restoration of hope. We learn again to dream beyond our current dispare. This is not a path or 12 step program to grief recovery. We all handle it differently and we all begin to dream the dreams of God's kingdom in our own time. Hope is just one of the signs of renewal, but we must seek to tell it in our story. Hope is a dream of reconciliation.

Another sign of restoration I see is a renewel of trust in God's love. It is an understanding that God is God and we are not. This starts to reveal itself as we continue to rely on prayer and the Word to guide us. Prayer in any form, whether it is angry or calm, whether it is questioning or trusting, whether it is uneasy or reverent, any prayer as we grieve work. God is present in our uneasiness and our questioning. This is time well spent because in these moments we learn to see life anew, to see God anew, to find direction in the midst of darkness.

The real problem, though, is that in grief, hope and the love of God are foreign concepts. Our souls appear to be dead and this is where the analogy of the possum takes on new meaning. Our members who have passed on are not the possums. The Christians who are left behind to grief are the real possums. Our souls play dead for awhile as we face life without our loved ones. It looms over us like an evil presence, a thorn in our side. We look to God and find more questions, more sadness, more anger, and more grief. In these moments the pulse and vitals of our soul, such as hope lie silent. In these moments our prayers seem like a foul dead odor. We become a possum. Like possums, in this state we can easily be mistaken for dead. Like possums, we want those who find us to leave us be. Like possums we need a quiet place to rest which has a clear exit. This exit is the story of reconciliation, God bringing new life to our souls. God's friendship and love patiently waiting for us to arise from our unconscienceness and once again follow the narrow road.

To whose of us who are not currently playing possum, it is our responsibility as the church to care for those who are in this state. We merely need to put them in a quiet place that has a safe exit to God. The rest is up to God and the possum.

¹ Blair, Brett. *Story Teller's Creed*, ChristianGlobe Network Inc: www.esermons.com , 2001

So, how do we do that? First we must carry respect for the vulnerability of the grieving. According to Gregory Clapper,

“Vulnerability has to do with a perception of danger in the environment that could cause you harm. To be vulnerable is to say that you are concerned with potential attacks by others. To be real, on the other hand, is to be concerned with being true to your experience. Whether or not that makes you vulnerable depends on the character of those who surround you. Your being real may elicit attacks, mockery, and sarcasm, or it may elicit empathy, care and compassion. The reaction of those who encounter your reality is finally a function of the kind of people that those people choose to be, not a function of who you are. Being real can make one vulnerable, but it should be our desire for living truthfully that compels us to be real, not a concern to either seek or avoid vulnerability.”²

What Gregory Clapper points to about the vulnerability of the grieving is the need for them to be real which the people around them can influence positively or negatively. Clapper goes on to say that, “When we weep, we tell the world what we value. When we weep with others who weep, we tell them, by our tears, that we see things the way that they see them.”

In Romans chapter 12 it says we should rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. As members of our congregation, our family, mourn, so too should we. As we listen to others we allow them to be real. We let them know that they are understood, and they equally can listen to us and we see that we are heard. In sharing our hopes, our fears, our dreams, our hurts, and our brokenness, God’s healing spirit works. This work only occurs as we allow pain to exist. We should never discount our tears. We can not afford to try shaking a possum awake. In doing this we risk seriously injuring them and we will hinder them from reviving. Let their fear be their fear. Let their pain be their pain. Do not discredit what they are feeling.

Imagine a four-year-old boy falling to his death from the 53rd floor of a New York City apartment building. Unimaginable as it seems, that is precisely what happened to the son of British rock star, Eric Clapton. Clapton's life was filled with tears of grief as the result of this shocking event. His son's death haunted him so much that he finally wrote a song about it. He called it, "Tears in Heaven." In February of 1993 this song of Clapton's won the Grammy as the "Song of the Year." Mr. Clapton himself won the Grammy as Male Vocalist of the Year. Eric Clapton, however, would have given up all the success of these Grammy's in an instant if he could just have had his son back.

Clapton's song begins with these words: "Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same, if I saw you in heaven?" Mr. Clapton's separation from his son is real. His son is gone forever. As with others who grieve the loss of loved ones, however, Clapton desperately wants to communicate with him again.

Clapton's song continues. He envisions heaven for a moment. He knows that heaven is a place that he does not belong. That means that he must somehow find the strength to carry on

² Clapper, Gregory Scott. *When the World Breaks Your Heart*, The Upper Room: Nashville, 1999. 35.

when he knows, "I don't belong here in heaven." The singer gets a glimpse of heaven, a glimpse of hope. But in heaven he does not belong.

Verse two of "Tears in Heaven" returns to the same theme. He wonders if his son would hold his hand if he saw him in heaven? He wonders, further, whether his son would help him stand if he saw him in heaven? Clapton does not know the answers to his questions. He just believes that if he could get a glimpse of his son again his grief might be lightened. In his grief he cries out for some kind of contact with his son. But it is not to be. So, he sings, "I will have to find my own way, because I just can't stay, here in heaven." The burden of grief rests squarely on his shoulders. Heaven is of no help. Heaven is beyond his grasp. His son is beyond his grasp. He'll just have to make do as best he can. He'll have to "find his own way through night and day." Clapton's song is a very sad song! The grief is so real and the hope so illusory. Clapton knows he doesn't belong in heaven for whatever reason. Therefore, he will have to carry his own grief and his grief is a terribly heavy load.

Clapton sings of this heavy load in the next verse of his song. "Time can bring you down," he sings. Time can be devastating when you are locked in grief. Time can bend your knees; it has you "beggin' please." Such is Clapton's plight. He is reduced to begging. Surely he has begged God to give him a reason for his son's death. Why, God, Why? Surely he has begged God to bring his son back again. Surely he has begged God to lighten his load in life. There is a lot of begging going on in the midst of human tears of grief.

Clapton sees one bright ray of hope in the midst of his grief. He is sure that in heaven there are no tears. That's the source of the song's title: "Tears in Heaven." Tears are for the earth. Tears are grief's constant companion. Tears are grief's way of showing us the pit of emptiness that tugs so heavily upon us in our time of loss. Tears are vital to the healing process. Through the tears, however, Clapton sees a vision of a place where tears shall be no more. "There will be no more tears in heaven," he sings. There will be no more tears in heaven.³

These tears and feelings are too important for us to discount them they are vital to our healing process. They help us to return to the truth that God is a God of reconciliation, that we have God as our ever present friend, that through the cross of Christ we again can commune with God when we most desperately need to. Yes, indeed, these tears are important.

As we remember the lives of E. L. Manire, Vivian Croarkin, Ruble Hicky, Floyd Jones, Doris Sprawls, Bill Noah, and our most recent loss Paul "Honey" Smith, we need to look for those in our church family who are playing possum and take them to that quiet place where God can sooth and revive them, and to all of us whose souls are playing possum, our only task is to be real in the midst of our vulnerability, unashamed of our grief, unashamed of our tears. For in writing the story of today we know that it will not be the story of tomorrow or of yesterday. We will dream again. Our hope will be restored. We will again pray with confidence, but for now we pray. God be our foundation in the midst of high tides. God be our shelter from

³ Jensen, Richard A. *Lectionary Tales For The*, CSS Publishing: Lima, Ohio, 1994.

the storm. For now God we must ask is there any pain worse than ours. God carry us out of this darkness. Bring your healing spirit into the hearts of your faithful that they may comfort us in our grief. God we wait in the quiet. We wait in your sanctuary longing to feel something besides this pain. Revive our souls. Teach us to live again. It is in your holy name we pray. Amen.