

Then the Letting Go
August 19, 2007
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Ruth 1:1-18
Luke 2:41-51

On and off throughout this past spring, an interesting news cycle surfaced about the puzzling plight of honeybees who were vanishing and leaving empty hives throughout the United States. In a recent New Yorker article titled “Stung,” Elizabeth Kolbert delved deeper into the bee mystery, which is still unsolved. Her research on the disappearance of bees led her on a beekeeping journey of her own, and in her article she describes fascinating historical information about beekeeping.

Intriguingly, it was a congregational Minister from Philadelphia in the 1850’s, the Reverend Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth, who developed the now common bee hive design used by beekeepers. Kolbert tells his story:

Langstroth suffered from severe psychiatric difficulties; attempting to preach his first sermon, he came down with an acute case of what might be called rector’s block, and was unable to speak. He took up beekeeping in the hope that outdoor work would clear his mind.

Langstroth’s crucial insight was the concept of “bee space.” He realized that while honeybees will seal up passageways that are either too large or too small, they will leave open passages that are just right to allow a bee to pass through comfortably. Langstroth determined that if frames were placed at this “bee-space” interval of three-eighths of an inch, bees would build honeycomb that could be lifted from the hive, rather than, as was the practice up to that point, sliced or hacked out of it. [Today’s] box is equipped with inner lips from which frames can be hung, like folders in a filing drawer, and each frame comes with special tabs to preserve bee space.ⁱ

No word as to whether the Rev. Langstroth finished his sermon, but leave it to a minister with writer’s block to observe a dynamic in nature suitable for a sermon illustration one-hundred and fifty years later!

This idea of bee space is captivating. Imagine having enough presence of mind to know which passageways in life are too big or too small, so that you work to leave open only those places that you can pass through comfortably? Imagine if we had a honeycomb that could help us preserve that comfortable space in such a concrete and precise way?

I must confess, I am particularly intrigued by the bee’s ability to recognize and fill in passageways that are too small. Somehow, noticing and filling in the passageways that are too big is work I can understand, but passageways that are too small? At first I thought I had misread that part about the bees and the smaller passageways, so I went back and read again: “...honeybees will seal up passageways that are either too large or too small...”, seal up passageways that are too small. I saw myself suddenly as that one honeybee who was always getting stuck trying to squeeze through a passageway that was too narrow, rather than suffer the sadness of filling it up.

There are so many small and large passageways in our lives that require the work of grieving to fill them in and make a more comfortable space for ourselves; but grieving is a difficult emotional process. The passageways that are too big are hard to fill in because of lack of energy, and the little passageways are easy to ignore, even though their sting can be just as painful. Big or small, we tend to minimize grief and convince ourselves that it is time to move on or that we can just ignore it and allow time to do all our work. No one wants to hear that we have to fill those passageways ourselves.

When we experience loss, whether it is the death of a loved one or realization that a dream for ourselves will not be possible, it is not easy to believe or understand that our losses and our transformations are linked. In any loss there is a need to redefine who we are because one of the ways in which we have self-identified has been compromised. When we lose or leave or let go we are thrust into a very painful transformation. The transformation from what cannot be to what can be.

In her book, *Necessary Losses*, Judith Viorst writes about an eight-year old who was asked to "provide a philosophical commentary on loss." He answered, "It sucks!" This young philosopher expresses a universal truth: loss is painful and it is scary and it is disorienting. And yet, our losses and our transformations are inextricably linked.

The two Bible passages we heard today give orientation points for discussing our experience of loss. In the beginning of Ruth's story, she and Naomi and Orpah face the loss of their husbands, in Naomi's case she also loses her two sons. But while this provides a catalyst for Naomi's return to Bethlehem, it is another decision involving loss that provides the emotional transformation of this narrative. That decision is when, having gone part way with their mother-in-law, Orpah and Ruth make separate yet equally powerful decisions about whether to continue with Naomi. Orpah decides that she will stay in Moab, while Ruth decides to go to Bethlehem with Naomi.

Orpah loses the companionship of being with Ruth and Naomi. She makes a decision that for her the connection to place is what she cannot bear to lose. Ruth's decision is different; the loss she cannot bear is to be separated from Naomi. In going with Naomi, Ruth loses her connection to the land and people she had known her whole life.

Ruth's story is familiar, and we are privy to know more of her journey in Bethlehem. In particular, we know that she marries a kinsman, Boaz, and bears a son, Obed, who would become the father of Jesse, the father of David. This important family tree gives added significance to Ruth's decision, but it does not change the fact that despite her confidence, Ruth is letting go of a certain way of life when she makes the decision to go with Naomi. This loss is the transformation point in the narrative.

Ruth's separation from her life in Moab is distinctive. She is no longer considering herself a Moabite, geographically, culturally or religiously. Ruth tells Naomi: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Ruth speaks with such confidence, we often do not notice from where that confidence comes; it comes from that place of pain, a place of weeping, a place of clinging to the loss until she knows a decision must be made. Ruth is at that point where indecision becomes a decision too, and she moves from what can no longer be to what can be.

The narrative from Luke's Gospel is also a familiar one. It is the only information we receive from any of the Gospel writer's about Jesus in his adolescent years, and there are few of us in hearing it who don't empathize with Mary and Joseph and know that in this same situation we would stand up and ask the same question his mother does: "Child, why have you treated

us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” We know Jesus sometimes has to be Jesus, but this time we can resonate with the frustration of his parents.

Here we are privy to range of experiences of loss; Mary and Joseph experience first the fear of losing Jesus. They do not know where he is or what has happened to him. They experience that terror that their deepest fears might be coming true, that they will be separated from him forever. They return to Jerusalem and find him in the temple, teaching and listening and asking questions. Whose adrenaline as a parent wouldn't peak at that point as relief permitted the anger to flow from their mouths?

But his response, meant to identify him as the Son of God, meant to separate him from their care to his work, serves to put the truth of their fear before them. It is the truth that all parents must face – eventually our children have to be let go so that they can be who they need to be. Mary, as with many things in those days, “treasured all these things in her heart.” This response allows them more time. The separation is not happening at that moment. It is a transformation that is not ready to be enacted yet, but it is a loss that will be coming. Like Ruth's decision to leave Moab and go with Naomi to Bethlehem, Jesus will decide to leave his family of origin and live into his ministry. There will be no more time to keep open the passageways that are too big or too small, a transformation will have to happen.

Mary and Ruth each remind us in their own way of the importance of staying mindful to the possibility of transformation. They give witness to the pain that comes with transformation, and within a process that is incredibly chaotic and disorienting they give a touchstone. It is touchstone of the letting go. These two women know how that letting go is not easy. These two women know that letting go involves pain and suffering. These two women know that letting go is also the only way to enter the transformation. Without the letting go, the loss is not avoided, it merely takes another shape. Without the letting go, the honeycomb is never comfortable, it is always too spacious or too tight a squeeze.

The poet's have long given wonderful expression to loss and transformation. Among them, Emily Dickinson captures a bit more of the pain involved in the transformation we undertake in loss:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes --
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs --
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round --
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought --
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone --

This is the Hour of Lead --
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow --
First -- Chill -- then Stupor -- then the letting go --

After great pain, there is transformation. When we are in great pain, this knowledge is both the thing that grounds our hope and the thing we least want to hear. What we want, in that Hour of Lead, is to turn back time; moving forward, let alone experiencing a transformation, is impossible to imagine. Grief is that thing which brings us face to face with our inability to be control of everything, for although we try to control grief, we cannot do it.

We all have seasons in our own life that mark times of losing and letting go. Autumn has long been a season we associate with change. No doubt because it comes upon us too fast, when most of us are still clinging to the fantasies of summer, which technically may not end until mid-September, but we know emotionally and practically it ends over Labor Day weekend. It is also often a time of new beginnings, a new school year, a time when colleagues return to work in full-force, a time when everything is a clean slate. As New Yorkers, the change into September brings with it the remembrances of our city's heartbreak, the firsthand pain of the chaos of grief and its disorienting quality.

Whether we find ourselves in the pain and chaos or letting go, or at the point where only the shadow of loss is within our vision, or even if we are at the point of transformation, we can pause today and orient ourselves to the women's voices we have heard today. Emily Dickinson expresses directly in her words the pain that is the letting go, Ruth and Mary show us points just after and just before the letting go, giving us assurance that the times of letting go are not all there is. There are times of healing, times of rebuilding, times of learning, that we may feel confident despite our fear of letting go that there is something beyond it.

Part of what helps us keep our balance when we face those times of losing and letting go is repetition and ritual. We feed the cat, we brush our teeth, we read poetry, we pray the psalms, we walk, we make our feet, mechanical, go round. Repetition and ritual help us release the grasp and create bee space for ourselves. Without letting go we cannot fill in the passageways that are too big or too small; without letting go we do not have a honeycomb of comfort. Without letting go we are constantly feeling the wideness or narrowness of chaos. After great pain, there is a letting go; there is place of comfort. It is place where faith and fortitude give the assurance of God's love and mercy. It is place where courage and comfort are abundant. It is place that we see only by looking near and far and orienting ourselves as we loosen our grip and trust there is transformation between what can longer be to what can be.

ⁱ Kolbert, Elizabeth, "Stung: Where Have All the Bees Gone." *The New Yorker*, August 6, 2007.