

“Letters to God”

January 8, 2017

Faith in Film series – Collateral Beauty

I don't know many people who say that their favorite part of Scripture is Job. Job is a tough book for me and for a lot of people. The profound loss and grief Job experiences are difficult enough, but then add in Job's struggle with God - and the strained relationship with his friends.

At first, Job's friends do the right thing. Right after Job loses his family and all that he has, Job's three friends - Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar - simply sit with Job in silence. They weep and mourn with him.

Mary Ann Froehlich says, “When our pain makes it hard to feel God's presence, God will often send an actual person, touched by God's Spirit, to cling to us and not let go.” This is what Job's friends do at first.

As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Silent comforters are the true mediators of God.” Translation: It's okay to be silent – not to say anything to those who are grieving. If you take one thing away today, hear that.

Job's friends have the right idea. The gift of time and care is their offering. It's what they have to give to their friend in his deep grief. But then they try to explain things. They move from compassionate silence to offering unwanted advice and confronting Job.

Many of us – most of us - are uncomfortable with death, but death is the great equalizer. We may fear death - maybe not ours, but the death of those we love. Yet, we all experience it at some point. Whether it's the death of a loved one or the grief of loss in our life, we experience death. And to use a line from *Collateral Beauty*, “Death doesn't have any fans.”

No one is immune from death, and even though it's a common human experience, it's so hard for many of us to know what to say and what to do. We want to fix it. We want to make it better. But we can't. Another line of truth from the movie: “When something starts with dying, nothing is going to feel right.”

The premise is that Howard lost his 6-year old daughter, Olivia, to a form of cancer. Howard's friends - Whit, Claire, and Simon - are concerned and want to help him move through his grief. They discover that he writes letters to Love, Time, and Death. So they make a plan to engage him where he is - to meet him in his grief. As one character says, “He's reaching out to the cosmos for answers.” My translation: He's reaching out to God.

It reminded me of the power of coming to God in prayer in our grief. We reach out to God for answers - sometimes answers that we'll never receive - or at least not sufficient enough answers on this side of eternity. For Howard, though, writing becomes a part of engaging his grief. And journaling is a powerful practical tool that can

help us in grief.

Madeline, who facilitates a support group for parents who have lost children, tells Howard to engage and challenge Love, Time, and Death as they come to him. Howard begins to confront the “why?” questions that he carries and that all of us have, and it goes back to something he said in his work as an advertising executive. He taps into three truths: *We long for love. We wish we had more time. We fear death.* When he engages these truths, it makes a difference.

Back to Job...even though Job is a tough part of Scripture, it's a powerful testament to grief and prayer. The film portrayed the realities of grief, the intensity of it, the pain, and the disorientation that it can cause in our lives. When someone comes to GriefShare and hears that they aren't the only one who feels all of those emotions at the same time, I can see the relief. It's not easy, but there's power in knowing that grief truly affects us in more ways than we think.

There's a scene on the train when Howard confronts Death, who is an older white woman, with an honest conversation. He lashes out at her and talks about all of the answers and platitudes that people of every faith tradition have tried to offer him. He shares his anger and pain, and it reminded me that not one of us has the answers for someone who is grieving. We cannot possibly explain it away or make it okay. We can simply be with someone. We can be those silent comforters whose presence is a sign of love.

We don't have to try to speak for God either. God is big enough to take whatever a grieving person has to say. Our honest prayers and questions do not offend God. I believe that God welcomes them as a sign of our engagement with God.

Think about Jesus' life and ministry. Think about Jesus on the cross. As he was dying, he said the words of a psalm he knew - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If we're ever doubtful that God can handle our questions and doubts, we only need to remember that Jesus, in all of his humanity, expressed his own.

So perhaps the words of Psalm 23 can help us. Our silent comfort is an opportunity for someone who is grieving to feel God's presence and to know that they are not alone. We grieve because we love. We cannot take away or minimize the pain of loss, but we affirm by our presence that God loves, cares, and is with us in our grief. We can be a sign of God's grace if we're willing to allow God to be God - and simply be with people.

A woman I met in seminary gave me some great advice. She had experienced profound loss, including the loss of a child, and as we were talking about how to comfort someone, she said, “There's nothing you can say to make it better, and it's best to say nothing - or nothing more than ‘I'm sorry.’”

And a woman in the first church I served told me that she taught her kids an important lesson. When you go to a funeral, all that you need to say is, “you have my sympathy.” Nothing more than that.

We need one another in our grief. We need to be friends who will sit in compassionate silence without trying to explain anything. We must allow one another to doubt and question - even to doubt and question God. It's not unfaithful to ask God questions. Actually, it's an act of faith and trust to be able to come to God just as we are.

Howard's friends tried to stay with him. They truly wanted to help him - not to hurry him through his grief - but help him move through it so that he might find some hope and see *collateral beauty* in the midst of a tragedy. In the process, they discovered hope for themselves even as they faced personal struggles.

How do we stay with one another in grief? Most of us do our best right after a loss, but we don't always follow up. We move ahead, but it's not the same for the person who is grieving. We have to engage the grieving process as those who offer comfort for the long haul and not ignore it.

Friends, it's not easy. Grief is the most difficult work we do because it's so tied into our love for each other. But it will always be a part of life. Learning to express grief and engage grief is something all of us must do.

Howard had a lot to express from his heart, and when he did, there was some healing. What are the questions you want to ask God? The hard question. The deep questions. The tough questions. The agonizing ones. What are things you want to say to God?

The film's website has actually encouraged people to write their own letters to Love, Time, and Death, and you can see lots of letters there. Today we have an opportunity to write down our questions and thoughts and offer them to God.

You received a piece of paper and an envelope when you came in today. I invite you to write to God, seal it, and bring it forward as we come to receive this holy meal from God - this time when we commune with God and each other in a powerful way.

There are two mailboxes here, and you can put your letter in and receive Communion. These will not be opened or read, but will be prayed over and shredded.

Open your heart and share it with God today.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.