The Rev. Kimberly Reinholz
Church of the Holy Spirit
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John 11:1-45

I love the liturgies in the Book of Common Prayer, and I love one liturgist in particular (Andrew Reinholz, my beloved husband). But while I appreciate that the inclusion of the prayer: “You wept at the grave of Lazarus, your friend; comfort us in our sorrow.” in our funeral liturgy, a reference to today’s Gospel, and it is wise to not include the rest of the Gospel story about Jesus resuscitating Lazarus, I wonder if it would be wise to add an optional petition for those who are angry, hurt, rage-filled, and have nowhere to place those complicated emotions other than to direct them at one another.

Perhaps something like: “You helped Martha who accused you of being the reason for her brother’s death, be with us in our complicated grief,” because while the restoration of Lazarus’ health and life is often the focal point of the Gospel, in reality, more of us encounter the grief that comes outside ways than the miracle of seeing our loved ones walk out of a tomb.

It is important to talk about how God , and the Church, responds when we, like Martha, are angry and need to yell at someone, anyone, to get that grief, frustration, and agitation out of our bodies, hearts, and minds. The Good News today is that all feelings are right and necessary. Even if the emotional outpouring doesn’t qualify as “good,” the act of expressing emotion is good.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

The exchange between Martha and Jesus, in my mind's eye, plays a bit like a scene from a Telenovela. Martha, dishevelled, is sitting outside the door of her home; it's clear she's been crying, but she's just waiting there staring into the middle distance. She sees a crowd cresting over the horizon. She gets up and starts running towards them, yelling behind her to Mary, who is in the house. But Mary doesn't hear her, or doesn't want to join her.

We watch while Marth runs towards Jesus. Her arms are raised; it looks like she is going to embrace him, but she slaps him across the face, begins to whack him on the sides of his head, and pushes him in the chest. As she pommels him, she is yelling- "If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died!"She collapses at his feet, weeping. "Even now," she says, "God would do whatever you ask of him." With this, Jesus reaches down to pull her up and says gently, "Your brother will rise again." She takes a deep, heaving breath, draws her sleeves up, brushes her hands off on her dress, then wipes her eyes on the edge of her scarf. She mumbles and says in that kind of way that we all know, "yeah, I know, in the resurrection he will rise again". But what that means is that he is still gone to her now, and she doesn't know what she will do without him.

At this, Jesus grabs Martha's shoulders and puts his hand under her chin, saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha says Yes, Lord, I believe. At this, she turns and walks beside Jesus towards the house, leaning ever so slightly on his arm, where Mary stands waiting for them.

It is one thing to believe in God's power, love, and grace in an abstract sense, and another to live our lives understanding that, no matter how powerful, loving, and gracious God is, we will still experience powerlessness, hate, and malice. Not only will we experience these oppositional forces, but we will also encounter pain, suffering, and grief. Life and death, health and illness, celebration and suffering are all part of the tapestry of human experience.

There seems to be an internalized belief in the 21st century that being blessed, or set apart, marked as Christ's own forever in baptism, means that Christians are immune to suffering, sadness, grief, and loss. So many times, folks wonder why they are suffering, or why their family member is sick, whether they have been punished, or if there is some reason for this.

All too often, there isn't an answer other than to say illness, death, pain, and suffering are part of the human experience, but no God is punishing us based on the quality or quantity of our faith. Even in church communities, people keep that stiff upper lip, saying everything is fine when clearly it isn't, because of the misinterpretation that, with membership in the Church, life should be carefree.

Baptism doesn't eradicate bad things from happening to us or those we love; in fact, the more people we love, the more likely it is that we will experience suffering because that accompanies love. The more people we are connected to, the more likely we are to be disappointed, injured, let down, or to grieve when we no longer have those relationships.

What God gives in baptism isn't a way to keep us from feeling the stages of grief-denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance- but connections, and ways to express all that we feel, a place to fall apart

when we need to, and to be raised and reconnected to one another as well. With Martha, Jesus walks alongside her when she needs to yell and scream and collapse. Likewise, we accompany one another, this chosen community, adopted family, body of Christ, church, in good times and bad, in sickness and health, in hope and despair.

The truth is that God can handle all the punches, physical and emotional, that we can throw. God is resilient, powerful, and knows the pain that we have encountered, especially in the shadow of death, having experienced it on both sides. Jesus Christ shows this graceful power and nature as Martha, who he loves like Lazarus, and Mary, scream and cry and push him, blaming him for the death of her brother. The Holy Spirit continues to carry the weeping and wailing, the keening and crying that are heard the whole world round to the heavens and to the halls where prayers and praises are raised.

The Holy Trinity hears the cries and bears the grief. It is okay, healthy, and necessary to be angry with God at times. Holding onto the anger and allowing it to consume us rather than expressing it is what destroys our beloved relationship with God.

As someone who held on to my anger with God for a decade because I didn't know it was okay to be angry with God, to question, to yell, to fight, and push back. I was afraid that if I yelled, Jesus would send me to hell, or somewhere worse than the lonely, grief-filled place I lived. I didn't know Jesus would pull me up, like Martha, and that we could go back home, that in the church we could figure it out together, that I didn't need to be alone. The Holy Trinity is the example of what it means to be engaged in community, to be connected to one another, in the cosmic dance of need, ability, and desire, and we join in the dance, helping where we can, seeking what we need, and accepting that sometimes we give and sometimes we receive.

The Church isn’t a club for folks who think Jesus is kinda cool. The Church is the Body of Christ in the world. Though the church comes together for prayer and fellowship, learning and experiencing the sacraments, it also becomes home to those who desire it. The place we long for in the wilderness of the wider world is what Christians build together.

By God’s grace , a community where there need not be pretense or fear that we will not be loved if we don't have it all together, if we aren't Instagram-ready or picture-perfect, is built, with each of us feeling all the feelings, sharing our experiences, and holding one another up after falling apart. To be fully present as Christians, we build and rebuild trust by sharing all of ourselves, even our most vulnerable aspects, the doubt, fear, anger, grief, all those things that are kept at arm's length.

In the Body of Christ, we feel- yell, scream, laugh, cry, all of it so that we can let go of control and instead invite all of the members of Christ to help us reassemble our lives, and prepare to begin again.

God can take it. The Church can too. Together, we know we can support one another through the most difficult times in life. If we are willing and able to give over our anger, rage, hurt, and all the disappointments, as well as all the blessings of this life, to God. Then we are living lives not only as followers of Christ but as the Body of Christ in the world; it is only fitting to welcome all those who are told by the world to get over it because there is no getting over grief, only learning to live with it in all its various forms that all too often come out sideways when we have no where to express it.