

The End of Mourning

Isaiah 25: 6-9

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One of the latest must see Disney Pixar films is titled Coco. If you haven't seen it yet, you can watch it tonight at First UCC as a fundraiser for the finishing of the Los Hogares Project. It's on Netflix too. I'll do my best not to spoil anything. Coco's setting is the Day of the Dead in Mexico. The Day of the Dead is a Mexican celebration with Aztec origins that became connected to the Christian All Saints Day, and it is a lively, colorful, celebration. On the Day of the Dead, graves of the ancestors are decorated, the ancestors are celebrated and their stories are remembered. There's a party in the cemetery. The intent is to encourage visits of the souls, to invite the ancestors to cross over on this day. There is a communing with the family's ancestors.

The main character in Coco is a boy named Miguel who lives in a family that has experienced a painful loss, and the pain of that loss has lived on in the family for four generations. The pain is still alive. The mourning hasn't really stopped and now it is impacting Miguel's life. Miguel's great-great grandparents were a singing duo and music filled their lives. But then their daughter was born and everything changed. At one point in the movie, the great-great grandmother says to Miguel, "I remember that feeling when my husband would play and I would sing and nothing else mattered. But when we had Coco, suddenly there was something in my life that mattered more than music. I wanted to put down roots. He wanted to play for the world. We each made a sacrifice to get what we wanted."

The great-great grandfather leaves the family to follow his musical dreams, and in the pain of this loss, Miguel's great-great grandmother not only erases her husband from the family (he is not remembered at the Day of the Dead), she eliminates all music from family life too. The music ban is passed down to her daughter, and granddaughter and great-grandchildren. But her great-great grandson Miguel, has music in his heart. It won't be denied. The movie follows the adventures of Miguel as he follows his heart and by doing so, confronts this mourning that hasn't ended.

The movie has many surprises, twists and turns. It's beautiful and touching. I cried when I watched it once, and I cried when I watched it again. It is a Disney movie, so what we expect a happy ending. We expect something warm and tender, for Love to transform the whole story. And it does. These are stories we need to tell over and over. These are stories we need to see. Our Bible tells this story about God. That God and God's love ends pain, transforms mourning. It wipes away tears.

Scholars believe that our passage from Isaiah for today comes from the 8th century BCE, at a time when Jerusalem is being conquered by the Assyrian empire. In chapter 24, the prophet envisions the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah as the judgment of God on the everyone's unfaithfulness. The theology of judgment is always complicated, but I simply think of it as our ancestors saying that sin and injustice over time does have painful consequences.

But then we have chapter 25, a corresponding vision of affirmation and confidence in God's ability to bring new life. The prophets are truth tellers and hope tellers. They speak of the truth of the damage that injustice will do and then they boldly speak of the power that God's love has to transform the world, and us too.

The vision of wholeness is a great feast for all peoples, rich food, good wine. This is a rehearsal of a great theme. The great feast where all are welcome and invited is our symbol of wholeness and renewal too. We practice this whenever we come to the communion table. It's the symbol of the Realm of God for Jesus. Communion renews our individual life and empowers us to renew the life of the world.

But then this vision of Isaiah gets interesting.

"God will destroy on this mountain,
The shroud that is cast over all peoples
The sheet that is spread over all nations.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces."

Scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “the poet (or prophet) imagines that the earth has over it the pall (shroud, sheet) of death, beset by sadness, loss and mourning. The world is held in the grip of death and has no power to shake it off. *But the Lord of Life will terminate that mood.*”

God will swallow up death. Death here is more than the end of our natural lives, it is all that diminishes life and keeps us from living now. The prophet is placing hope in the power of the Love of God to wipe the tears of the living. In a time of pain and loss the prophet proclaims that God will swallow up, will transform, all that steals life from us.

Brueggemann also says this: The poet speaks about nothing less than radical, complete transformation. Biblical faith is not a moral system; it is not a mode of holding on or staying in control. It is rather an act of yielding in the present to the assurances given for God’s future.”

In other words, Biblical faith is an act of trust, surrendering to the power of love, welcoming it in. We trust and welcome this love in, as we face our own mortality, and we trust that we, like our ancestors, will be held in the love of God and will be ok. We trust and welcome this love in, as we live in the midst of the hurt and pain and injustice of the world. We trust that there is love in our midst that is greater than the death dealing, life-diminishing powers of the world. We keep going with this hope, we surrender to it, and we hold off despair.

And, we trust and welcome in this love of God as we live through our own personal losses, grief big and small. We must mourn our losses. It is impossible not to. The loss of those we love, the loss of our hopes, the loss of the way things were, whatever they are big and small. It is unhealthy not to mourn. That’s how pain lives on in destructive ways from one generation to the next.

But the promise is that God will not leave us there. God will not leave us with that shroud hanging over us. When it is time for our mourning to end, God will bring new life. God will surprise us with exactly how, exactly what that new life looks like. But God will wipe our tears and turn our mourning into dancing. Our ancestors say this over and over again.

At memorial services, I often speak about waiting for and trusting that resurrection will break through for us. As painful as it is, we hear assurance from our ancestors of faith that God will bring new life, God will wipe our tears.

When I was first in ministry in Wisconsin, I presided at the wedding of a couple in their late forties early fifties. Both had children in high school and college. Both had lost their spouses to cancer some time ago. Both had grieved this loss deeply. One member of this new couple somewhat reluctantly gave permission for his son to go along on a confirmation trip with to Chicago. He met with me and grilled me with all kinds of questions and in that conversation he talked about being a single parent and the responsibility he felt to his children and to his deceased spouse. In that I could see his deep love and his pain. He said it was difficult to do the work of letting go, and he mentioned as well that it didn't help that I didn't look much older than his middle schooler. He let his son go, and his son had a good time, and he came home safely.

Somehow through efforts to raise money to battle cancer, they had found each other and a life-giving friendship turned into something more.

When we met to plan the wedding, they told their story and they were both so surprised that they were meeting with me. They didn't see this in their future and they both made clear that they loved their spouses. They were happy like they hadn't been in a long time. In a variety of ways they were asking one another, and they were asking me, "is this ok? Is this really happening? Is it ok to embrace love and joy again?"

In the moment and at the wedding I tried to communicate, "the love of God does this sort of thing. God brings new life when we don't expect it. God wants us to live."

They were growing in their trust that they could receive this gift and take this love in. They were growing in their trust that their mourning could end and it didn't diminish their love for their first spouses. They were growing in this trust that they could embrace this new life that was given to them and that they could truly live.

As we live this journey, we will face our share of losses, we will mourn. We will live through those seasons, AND, we are invited to grow in trust that the Love of God is here, it is powerful, it wants to transform the mourning of the world. It wants to transform the pain of our lives. God will be working to bring new life in surprising ways. We are invited to trust this love, to hold onto this hope, and to embrace the gift with gratitude and joy when we experience it. Thanks be to God. Amen.