

“Listen and Grow”

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Matthew 18:15-16, 18-20
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Rev. Phillip J. Romine
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

“Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead...”¹

If you consider yourself even mildly Presbyterian, I highly recommend both the book and the film version of Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*. Maclean published the book some fifteen years before his own death. His story captures the beautiful grief that seems to accompany all of us who spend even a few minutes reflecting on our mortality and the mystery of love.

His novella is highly personal. It focuses on the closest relationships he cultivated, relationships with people and with places who were the nexus of his most visceral joy as well as his most devastating sorrow.

Maclean’s story is something of a longer meditation on today’s Gospel passage: about how we come into and out of conflict with one another; the messy business of reconciling ourselves to each other; and allowing ourselves to be unique, imperfect, and beautiful images of God, trusting that where even two or three of us are gathered, there is God in our midst.

But what of the times when we’re the only one from our group of two or three left? When those we loved and did not understand in our earlier days are gone? It can be and often is devastating to live in loneliness. It seems an inevitable part of the grief of growing old to flirt with, if not fully embrace, pining for the past while the present passes us by.

Before our ancestors saw the Holy One of All Creation in the particular person of Jesus, they recognized him as—among other things—a prophet of oppressed people. There is a deep resonance between the highly personal words of Jesus to his followers and the deeply political calls to repentance from the prophetic lineage. How else might God dwell in our midst if we, in the words from Ezekiel, “do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways?”²

The griefs of our personal lives are no less personal than the griefs of our public life. This week, the UN published a report confirming what scientists, activists, and indigenous elders have been warning about for centuries: humanity has failed to contain global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. We must now make drastic changes—political, indeed global in scope—to bring the planet back below the danger zone for human habitation. The PBS article covering the report’s release offers one subheading titled, “Adapting to a deadlier, hungrier, thirstier world.”³

The very personal depression and anxiety many among us experience because of this avoidable disaster has been documented long enough that in 2024, the National Institutes of Health published a systematic review of studies quantifying eco-anxiety and symptoms of major affective disorders.⁴

In March of this year, the National Institutes of Health also published a study on the history, health impacts, and potential implementation and outcomes of a plan for reparations for Black American

¹ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (London: Pennyroyal Press, 1989), 161.

² Ezekiel 33:8.

³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/global-warming-will-exceed-1-5-degree-limit-un-says-in-report-that-maps-path-back-below-danger-zone>, accessed 9/4/26.

⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11577747/>, accessed 9/4/26.

descendants of people enslaved in this country. The very personal health consequences of denial of equal protection under the law for generations of Black Americans are exacerbated by a wealth gap of more than \$16 trillion dollars.⁵

Public grief over the ongoing fight for queer and trans rights; a weaponized federal system of immigration enforcement; political instability causing famine and violent ethnic conflicts throughout the world: these are part and parcel of real individual people's lives, of our lives. God tells Ezekiel that he will have saved his own life by telling the wicked to turn from their wicked ways, even if they lose theirs. The great tragedy of our time is that the opposite seems to be true: the apathetic, negligent, ignorant, and greedy ways that have led to our political tragedies of genocide, poverty, mass incarceration, ecological collapse, and violent repression threaten primarily the lives not of the wicked, but of the truth-tellers.

If we hear these words about our public griefs and feel personally attacked, uncomfortable, defensive, or dismissive, we fall short of recognizing that—even if we don't feel personally impacted right now—these griefs are all our griefs.

And if we hear the words of personal loss and of the loneliness of long life, and wish to dismiss these as less important, less meaningful, less terrible than our humanity-scale issues, we also fall short of recognizing that—even if we don't feel personally impacted right now—these griefs are all our griefs.

In other words: we must be honest with each other about the fact that, while we may hear each other's griefs, we do not always honor them. We listen politely; we may learn and remember something we hear. But if we simply listen and learn and move on, are we finding our way toward God?

The Hebrew prophets were spokespeople for God's call to action: *teshuvah*, what we translate, somewhat feebly, as "repent." *Teshuvah* is not a recipe for guilt or shame, even less an excuse to feel self-satisfied that because we believe or know or do or say certain things we have successfully repented. *Teshuvah* beckons us to "return to the land of our soul," that part of ourselves irreversibly connected to the One who created us and never lets us go.⁶ *Teshuvah*, repentance, is God's perennial call to each person and to all peoples to remember who we are, whence we all come, and whither we all go.

Jesus begins his ministry with the same command: repent...or more accurately, *be repenting*. That is, *always* be repenting; never stop growing into the fullness of the person God made you. If God's image inhabits each of us, the griefs we share with each other reflect something of God's longing for us to grow not away from but towards one another. It can be as simple as gathering with one or two others...and as difficult as baring the part of your soul that hurts the most; difficult because we risk, at the least, not being fully understood, or worse, having our humanity diminished, or worst of all, being violently rejected, something Jesus knew all too well.

Right now we are told—largely because we tell ourselves—that the generations are at odds with each other: that the Boomers and the Gen-X-ers and the Millennials and the Gen-Z's and the Gen-Alphas all think and act and talk and listen with conflicting priorities and contradicting principles. What we are not told—and so what we listen less for—is that we are each and all bound together by the same personal and political griefs of living in a dominant culture that shouts at us to consume happiness, rather than reaching out to each other. We share the griefs of living in a dominant culture that simultaneously withholds and overwhelms us with information about the injustices that seem too big for us, rather than seeking to do justice by one another, by honoring our common humanity. We share the griefs of a

⁵ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC13034248/>, accessed 9/4/26.

⁶ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5808387/jewish/Repentance-Teshuvah.htm, accessed 9/4/26.

dominant culture moving ever faster and incentivizing us to keep up, rather than slowing down to check in on one another.

No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Right now, everyone can do the work of listening to the griefs each of us carries, and growing more fully into the person God made us by reaching out for each other. Jesus reminds us that we do something with the Spirit of God when we do it together. Ezekiel reminds us that, even if the wicked ways of our world don't heed the truth God calls us to speak, we will continue growing into the person God made us.

I withheld the second part of Norman Maclean's penultimate paragraph earlier. "Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them." When we reach out to listen to voices from our past, we are invited not simply to learn a thing or two to pass along, but to grow into our divine fullness, to return to the land of our soul, a place where the global and the personal griefs of our time amend the ground of our being.

Norman Maclean wrote about his father's reflections on loving and not understanding Norman's brother, Paul, even after he dies. What Maclean doesn't write is that we can also reach out to the living.

Around 4:45 am a few weeks ago, I was walking with my son to meet a fishing guide. We were on vacation in Germany, and Hugo had met lots of German cousins and extended family. He started to tell me that there were lots of people he cared about: his parents, his sister, his grandparents, his American cousins and aunts and uncles and friends, and that he thought each of them occupied a portion of his heart. He realized his heart was already pretty full, and that he didn't have a lot of space left for his German cousins and grandparents and aunts and uncles. I was about to jump in, but before I could interrupt, Hugo finished by saying, "So, I guess I just have to grow my heart bigger."

Gather with one another, in conflict and consensus. Tell each other the truth of who God made you. Share the global and the local griefs weighing you down. But share too that which makes your heart grow bigger, for it will lead you back to the land of your soul, where God has always abode. Amen.