

*The Grief That Makes for Joy*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*February 25, 2024, Second Sunday in Lent*  
*Psalms 22; Mark 8:31-9:1*

**Welcome** to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Second Sunday in Lent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

When I was growing up I knew people who seemed to believe that being a Christian meant being eternally cheerful.

Even Jesus was not eternally cheerful. He was fully human as well as fully divine. He suffered temptations and trials. He insisted on the importance of truth.

Church is not meant to be a place where we act happy all the time. Sometimes it is a place where we bring our pain and grief, our fear and depression, our anger and doubt. But it is a place where grief makes for joy, because if we are truthful about our pain, we find people here eager to comfort and support us. We find people who will keep us company as we walk through it, and some who have gifts or experiences to help us through it. We find others who are struggling whom we can support even as we struggle, which helps us heal, and we find others who are truly happy and have light to share with us.

Most of all, we learn here about a God who is present especially to those who are suffering, and who asks us to do the same. This is why our congregation has helped create the position of Strafford Community Nurse. We will have the opportunity to meet Sheila Keating today after the service and learn how she supports people in need. We will also have the opportunity, as always, to extend care and support to one another in our need, so that this may continue to be a place where love surrounds grief and grief makes for joy.

**Call to Worship** Lent recalls Jesus in the wilderness and also in his last days journeying toward the cross and Easter. Lent is about our journey, too—preparing ourselves to die to our anxious, self-concerned self and be resurrected closer to our true loving, Spirit-filled self.

This usually does not happen without a painful struggle. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some of the gospel accounts put those words on Jesus’ lips as he hangs on the cross, but if we read the whole Psalm we find that it begins in a Lenten wilderness and then leads to the promised land and Easter dawn.

The purpose of Lent is to go through our own wilderness in such a way that our grief makes for joy. Jesus teaches us how to do this. So let us bring into worship now all our suffering and loss, and our concerns about the suffering and loss of the world and those we love, and let us open our hearts to the life-changing power of the Spirit’s presence within and among us here.

**Children’s Time** A book I’m reading for Lent uses the word compunction and points out that we have lost its true meaning. It sounds like puncture, and that’s part of it—it means our heart is punctured or pierced with guilt and regret, but the book points out that there was more to it traditionally in the church.

I learned the full meaning of compunction through one of the worst things I did as a boy.

One late fall day I was walking home from school with my friend, Fred. We walked past a field of feed corn and Fred got the idea of taking a couple of fistfuls of the rock hard kernels and pelting the windshield of a car to scare the driver. We thought it would be funny, so we crouched between parked cars, and when someone came along we threw our corn—a direct hit.

We laughed, but the car slammed on its breaks and the door flew open and a man burst out. We took off up a back street but he caught us and I have never seen anyone so mad. He said, “Do you realize what could have happened? I could have had an accident and been killed or killed someone.”

I felt ashamed and scared. He asked our names. He looked at me and he said, “I know your father. How do you think he is going to feel about this?” Well, I thought I knew exactly how my father was going to feel, and it was not good. I saw my guilt and I felt sick at the thought of my parents’ reaction. I have no idea how I got through the afternoon and evening carrying that weight and hiding it from them.

That night as my mother tucked me in I confessed the whole thing. And what do you think she did? She forgave me, and she promised my father would, too.

I couldn't believe it. Suddenly I realized I was held in greater love than I could have imagined. I felt relief, and overwhelmed with gratitude, and it made me want to be a better person.

And that is the meaning of compunction—it is a grief that makes for joy when we realize that despite everything we are still forgiven and loved. Compunction is a growing pain, we grow bigger hearts, becoming merciful ourselves for having received mercy.

In the Lord's Prayer we say forgive us our trespasses, meaning forgive everything we do wrong. And God does, just as my parents did. We can feel grateful joy every time we pray it. Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

### ***The Grief that Makes for Joy***

The gospel passage we just heard is both one of the most difficult and one of the most important.

It helps to keep in mind the context. The first thing to remember is the slogan for the movement Jesus was trying to build. It is usually translated as "Repent, for the realm of God is at hand," but the Greek word repent is *metanoēō*, where we get the word metanoia. The saying means to undergo a transformation of consciousness, to expand the eyes of the heart to be able to see the spiritual reality within the material world, the realm of God within and around us.

The second thing to keep in mind is that Peter loved Jesus deeply, and Jesus loved Peter, and Jesus was moved by love to try to show people the way to undergo metanoia.

A third thing to remember is that metanoia is not the end, it is the means. A heart and mind that have undergone metanoia have a greatly enlarged capacity for love, because eyes enlightened by metanoia see the oneness of all creation in the Spirit.

The result of that kind of Christ-like love, known as agape, is the creation of the beloved community of God's realm on earth, known as koinonia. That is the end result of all that Jesus was trying to do, and it is what the Spirit is trying to move us to do—grow to be so loving that the realm of God forms around us.

It all begins with metanoia, but metanoia depends on an essential prior step of letting go of our old way of looking at things, opening to allow the Spirit to evolve our consciousness. That first step is self-emptying, called kenosis.

That is what this gospel story is all about, and why it is most difficult. Yet if we want spiritual growth, and if we want the wisdom and strength to move our world toward being God's realm of compassion, justice and peace, kenosis is where we need to begin.

Jesus saw that he had to give his life to pry people loose from their old selfish, materialistic ways, a death he had to undergo that would lead to new life.

Peter took him aside and rebuked him for saying such things because he loved Jesus and didn't want him to suffer, and didn't want to lose him.

Jesus loved Peter, too, even as he rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus must have felt the temptation to set his own mind on human things, the temptation to cling to security and conformity, or he would not have called Peter Satan, so Jesus must have been preaching as much to himself as to others when he said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life...will save it."

Jesus knew full well the grief his shocking, paradoxical words would cause. It is human nature not to want to die even a metaphorical death. That is why Jesus was quick to say that some would see the realm of God on earth—in other words their kenosis would succeed in leading to metanoia and agape and koinonia.

Jesus was teaching the spiritual path that had delivered him through the wilderness, and that later would lead him through his grief and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane, through his anguish on the cross, all the way to the light of Easter dawn.

He was showing us the way to go when we are struggling and long for peace and joy, when we feel lost and hopeless and long for new life and light, when we grieve what is happening in the world and long to help transform it. So how do we get on this way?

The path begins for us as it began for Jesus and for Peter. Our first step is to stay with our truth, even if it is suffering loss and grief, or frustration and confusion about the way itself. Stay on the path!

The second step is to understand what Jesus means when he asks us to lose our life. It is summed up in what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will but thy will be done.”

Jesus is teaching us to undergo a shift of mind and will from a human orientation to a divine or spiritual orientation. The self we shift away from is often called the false self. It is the selfish self that takes as its strategy for happiness excessive striving for things like approval and security, power and control, perfection and success, pleasure and comfort.

These programs of happiness are not good for three reasons. First, because they do not get us what we want—they do not bring lasting happiness, they do not bring abiding peace or joy. Second, because they lead to actions in the world that pit us against one another, or lead to differentiation and separation from our neighbor, as opposed to *koinonia*, building beloved community.

And third, they are not good because they get in the way of what *is* good. The Catholic monk and great teacher of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating, put it this way: “Liberation from the entire false-self system is the ultimate purpose of Lent. . . . As we dismantle our emotional programs for happiness, the obstacles to the risen life of Jesus fall away, and our hearts are prepared for the infusion of divine life at Easter.”

Jesus asks us to let go of our self-will. Then something miraculous happens. We find that a way opens up that we did not know was there, a passage that leads through grief and pain to peace and joy. The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodrin wrote a book entitled *The Wisdom of No Escape*. That is a good phrase for what we find. Another is from the Sufi poet Rumi, who calls on us to die before we die, and says that when we dive into the fire, we come out in the stream.

I know this path sounds hard and maybe feels unclear, so I will end by saying how I try to walk it. I try to practice mindfulness throughout the day and pause when I notice that my selfish self is acting up, and try to shift my mind from human things to spiritual things.

I also set aside a few times every day for Centering Prayer, which is a twenty or thirty minute stretch where I let go of my thoughts every time I catch myself caught up in them, practicing self-emptying, opening room for the Spirit.

I also read a little bit every day, trying to learn from spiritual masters of any tradition about the way of kenosis, metanoia, agape and *koinonia*, by whatever name they call it.

I also try to get outside every day, where I find the Spirit is easier to feel.

I wish I were a better model and teacher, but all I am is someone who is trying to understand and follow this path who is very glad to walk with you as you attempt it, too.

So let us join together now in a silent, self-emptying prayer...

**Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:**

The apples are gone  
But the full moon hangs yellow  
In the bare branches