

Day 19: Sunday, Introduction of Bargaining

Making Deals with God

“Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’” —Genesis 32:26

What can we do to change our fate or the fate of a loved one who is dying? What deal can we strike that might save us? What sin can we confess that will reverse death’s painful course?

In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross and Kessler tell the story of Howard, who lost his beloved wife, Millie, in a tragic car accident. While Howard sat in the hospital, waiting to hear from the doctors whether Millie would survive, he repeated, “Please, God, let her live . . . I’ll be a better person . . . I’ll volunteer . . . I’ll devote my life to you.”

Bargaining with God may not seem like a helpful stage of grief, but it serves a purpose. It gives the grieving person something to do, distracting them from the pain. Kübler-Ross and Kessler also say bargaining changes over the course of grief. At first Howard bargained to save Millie. After she died, Howard’s bargaining turned to “if onlys.”

“Guilt is often bargaining’s companion,” write Kübler-Ross and Kessler. *If only we could go back in time*, the grieving person thinks, saying and praying things like *I’d take a different road. I wouldn’t have caused that distraction. I wouldn’t have left the house.*

Inevitably, grievers move through the bargaining stage, coming to accept the sad reality of their loss. Bargaining helps us get from one stage of grief to the next.

Prayer: *Patient and wise God, you know how difficult it is to lose someone we love. Thank you for listening and attending to us in our grief, for receiving our bargaining with grace. Amen.*

Teri

Day 20: Monday

God Never Lets God

“[Nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” —Romans 8:39

“Daddy, where is that hole?”

“Daddy, what happens if we fall into that hole?”

“Daddy, can they cover up that hole?”

My then-five-year-old asked this litany of questions as we watched Pixar’s *Soul* (2020) for the first time. The questions arose 10 minutes into the movie when Joe Gardner, a middle-school music teacher and jazz musician, falls into an open sewer hole in New York City, dies and finds himself heading to “The Great Beyond.”

In our society, where we often find it quite tempting to avoid acknowledging the “hole” truth, I find it striking and even refreshing how several recent children’s movies have chosen not to escape into fantasy but rather to lean directly into death’s reality and the hard questions that accompany it.

It’s also one reason I appreciate that the church has seasons like Lent.

Lent is a journey that begins with the whole, ashen truth marked clearly upon our forehead. It continues toward the cross and then ends before the empty tomb and the promise that we are held by a Savior who has gone before us into the depths.

And although walking that journey does not mean we can suddenly answer every question about what happens once someone “goes in,” it does mean we can say to our children with full confidence: “Yes, everyone does go into the hole at some point or another. And the one thing we know for sure is this: You know how we you hold close with all our love? Well, God is holding us like that right now. And God never lets go — even when we go into the hole.”

Prayer: God of life and life eternal, we give thanks that we are held in your eternal embrace. Your gracious gift steadies us, strengthens us and inspires us. In our words and actions, may our lives give expression to this kind of love. Amen.

Bobby

Day 21: Tuesday

Trust God to Figure It Out

“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.”—2 Timothy 1:5

My mom would love this place was my thought, over and over, as I walked through an eclectic Saturday-afternoon market lined with trinkets and antiques.

At one point I reached for a postcard, which felt inexplicable because I had no intention of buying anything.

What am I even doing? I wondered.

And then my body told me.

A lump arrived in my rapidly heating throat, and tears fell without invitation. I was suddenly consumed with the idea that I'd love to buy this postcard, write a few notes about this market and then mail it my mom — perhaps hinting at all the Christmas gifts I'd found for her there.

“Wait till you see some of the treasures here, Mom! Right up your alley.”

But my quiet tears made me newly aware that such a mailing has not been possible for nearly five years now.

The truth is that colorful trinkets and distractions line the aisles of life today — and frequently we welcome their easy diversion. Even so, the body always eventually speaks.

A lump in the throat. A tear upon the cheek. A sigh from our depths.

And while these are never easy to receive, they do reground us.

My tears invited me to think of my mom and a few other saints who have come before me. I sent my love in the form of a grateful prayer, trusting — as always — that God will figure out the delivery system.

Prayer: God of all generations, thank you for the faithfulness of those who have gone before us. Thank you, too, for your faithfulness, which abided even in their wandering, and abides in my wandering. Draw me away from the many distractions, and help me honor the gifts you and they have given me. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 22: Wednesday

Resting from Bargaining

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”—1 Corinthians 6:19

As I grow older, I grieve the loss of my younger body. I grieve the metabolism of my 20s and my ability to drink a beer without worrying about expanding my waistline. I grieve knees that don't grow sore if I eat too much sugar and a lower back that doesn't cramp while bending over to bathe the dog. I grieve the strength of legs that could run me around a track faster than the other girls.

I'm not okay with this loss.

I am in constant negotiations to turn the clock back. If I apply this eye cream, my tired bags and wrinkles will magically disappear. If I stick to this six-day cleanse and eat nothing but soup for a week, I will lose the weight collecting around my waist. If I rub this expensive magnesium oil (filtered from the organic soil of a remote Australian village) on the

soles of my feet, then I will stop grinding my teeth while I sleep and eliminate my sugar cravings.

I visited a natural cemetery near my home in Virginia on a writing assignment. I'm claustrophobic and have never liked the thought of my body being buried in a casket. At the natural cemetery, the body is wrapped in a biodegradable shroud before burying. Renewable plots conserve space; 75 years after the deceased has returned to the earth, the cemetery offers the lot to another. This 75-year term extends far beyond the time a body takes to return to its natural elements in the earth.

Touring this natural cemetery in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, I recalled the *Book of Common Worship's* words of committal at the graveside: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, says the Spirit. They rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

Rest. Rest from labor. Rest from constant bargaining, constant negotiating of loss. This is what God desires for us. This is where our aging process leads us, a gift to my body and yours.

Prayer: Eternal God, help us accept our bodies as you created them. Help us enjoy the ride that is this life until it is time to rest. Amen.

Teri

Day 23: Thursday

God's heart Is the first to break

"[Abraham] said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?'"—Genesis 18:23-24

When we try to make deals with God, everybody loses.

In Genesis, God makes a plan to destroy Sodom. When God shares this news with Abraham, Abraham tries to talk God down. Would you spare Sodom for 50 righteous people? How about 45? Or 30? Abraham eventually negotiates God down to sparing Sodom if 10 righteous people can be found in the city.

Of course, Sodom is still destroyed. The story is horrifying, as it describes attempted sexual assault on travelers and a father who offers his daughters in their place. (What?) When we try to make deals with God, everybody loses.

It's even worse in Judges, chapter 11. Jephthah, Judge of Israel, is supposed to be wise and discerning. But he makes a foolish vow that if God helps him defeat the Ammonites, he will sacrifice the first creature to come out of his house to greet him when he returns home. Of course, when he returns home victorious, the one who first greets him is his daughter. He fulfills his vow anyway and sacrifices her to the Lord. (What is it about our willingness to sacrifice our daughters?)

When we try to make deals with God, everyone loses. Still, we try. Bargaining is a natural impulse in grief, but it is utterly counterproductive.

I wonder if we bargain with God in grief because we have stopped trusting God to be good. The unthinkable has happened. All is lost. We try to convince God to get back on our side.

Our faith affirms that God is always working for good. Unspeakably awful things will happen, but God's love and goodness remain. The cross teaches us that when the unimaginable happens, God's heart is the first to break.

Prayer: God, help me trust your goodness, even and especially when I cannot see it. Amen.

Ginna

Day 24: Friday

Jesus Bargained Too

“And going a little farther, [Jesus] threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.”—Mark 14:35

If we're feeling bad about our tendency to bargain, let's remember that Jesus does it too.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays three times to be spared the ordeal that lies ahead. Let that sink in for a second. In the eleventh hour, Jesus wanted out! Just because he ends by saying, “Not my will, but thy will be done,” it doesn't negate the fact that he asks three times if there might be another way.

We focus so often on Jesus' divinity that we forget the gift of his humanity. In Jesus, God knows what it feels like to be terrified and look for an escape route. God knows what it feels like to beg and plead for things to be different than they are. God knows what it's like to make deals with the heavens, even while recognizing that it is all to no avail.

Jesus doesn't get what he wants when he bargains with God, and likely neither will we. Maybe we find comfort in trying to assert our agency, to get a foothold of power in a situation completely beyond our control.

Many people who are grieving would give anything to have their loved one back. God knows what this feels like, too. The calculus of the Trinity means that God knows what it feels like to lose God's own child.

Eventually, our futile efforts at bargaining give way to surrender. In the economy of God's grace, we do not need to strike any deals.

Prayer: Sovereign God, it is so hard to say, “Thy will be done.” As I incorporate the reality of new grief into my world-view, help me to rely on your grace. Amen.

Ginna

Day 25: Saturday

Bargaining as Control

“Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’”—Genesis 32:26

Bargaining is about control. In a place of grief and shock, we seek to regain some semblance of the control we've lost — or some illusion of the control we never had to begin with.

I do most of my bargaining with knowledge and information. If I can just learn everything there is to learn about something — the disease my loved one has, the medical procedure I'll undergo, even the grief process itself — then I can do everything within my power to influence the outcome.

Knowledge is a beautiful thing, and sometimes it really helps the process. But what I'm really looking for isn't knowledge. It's security: a guarantee that I can keep my loved ones and myself out of harm's way. I'm asking God and the universe to promise me that I won't lose anything or anyone else. That assurance never comes.

I wonder what Jacob is really looking for the night he wrestles with God. Safety and prosperity for his family? Victory over his brother Esau, whom he will meet the next day? Forgiveness from God (and perhaps from Esau, too) for his earlier betrayal?

What Jacob gets is a new name and a limp.

Jacob gets a new name because grief changes us. We will never be the same people that we were before the loss. What we have been through takes up residence in our body and soul; our identity is not quite what it was before. And Jacob receives a limp because wrestling with God takes its toll. We all bear the scars of our attempts to wrest control from the hands of the universe.

Yet Jacob receives one more thing – a blessing – because through the struggle, he refuses to let go of God. Perhaps therein lies the lesson for us when we wrestle in the present day.

Prayer: God, as I walk through this tumultuous time, do not let go of me until I have received your blessing. Amen.

Ginna