

Fourth Interim sermon
Mark 13: 32-37

What is the elephant in the room? I recently facilitated a leadership retreat for a group of pastors. They were working hard to design a plan to revitalize their congregations. They were anxious about finances, loss of membership, being church in non-church culture. I started by asking them – what do you think is going on at the heart of your congregation? What is hurting their souls these days? What is the darkness you need to pay attention in your congregations?

Curiously, we found ourselves talking about sadness and loss. They counted those who had left their congregation – who had been active once; and dear friends – families who do not attend very often. And together we asked why? The pastors lamented for those in their congregation who had died or are very ill – and noted empty chairs in the sanctuary. They asked why?

One missed a beloved youth director, her energy and how she loved kids. She said we even created a brand new nursery and it sits empty. Another talked about finances –or lack of them. And how the mission budget has suffered.

Another pastor, was angry and said the problem was the session they just did not care anymore. Another blamed herself.

Before long, the group soon moved on to personal losses – death, grown up children, health, friendships – they asked why?

Late in the evening – this group of experienced pastors were tired and exasperated - because no one had any answers. Then someone who had been quiet – said out loud - let's just name the elephant in the room!

Everyone paused a very pregnant pause. As they continued to talk – it became clear that this elephant that no one was paying attention to - was grief and deep sadness for those who left their church, those who they had known for years – those they had a shared meal when their lives were coming apart – those babies and children whom they baptized and taught confirmation - who they had promised to nurture in the stories of Jesus. Many were not there anymore -They lamented with tears in their eyes and **admitted the elephant was how much they missed them.**

The problem was no one was talking about these losses –except maybe to blame themselves or the leadership. The deal with loss is if you do not pay attention to it – you will be haunted and stuck from moving on- and do the same things you have always done – and nothing new can happen.

This interim time – the transition between how things have been for at least the last 35 years and the next part of your journey - is a perfect time to talk about that elephant – that is your sadness, loss, and grief. Maybe it is for Tim, maybe Ione, maybe Eric, maybe things said and not said– or maybe some member who is not sitting in the pew anymore. Loss is loss – and it happens when what you have known is no longer in the same place.

Loss is a part of every congregation – especially these days. But you- get to intentionally take a time out – to step back, breathe and take a look at where you have come from and explore clues of what is next. But first we have to work through the losses before we can see the new thing God is doing. Or if you don't, you might miss it.

Elizabeth Kubler- Ross says the end of a relationship is like a death. She provides stages of grief to work through in order to move on to a new place.

Caution - it is hard work – very hard work. Before we go much further in our time together, we need to name the elephant in room. (there is probably more than one-)

Tim's retirement is the end of an era - the end of how you have known it to be – for some of you what church is supposed to look like - and it is a kind of death.

Whether you feel a deep sadness or relief about Tim's departure, it's important to talk about it. Death, loss changes everything. The Kubler-Ross stages of grief are the same for churches. We all have elephants in the room – when we recognize it – that is the beginning of healing and help you move to a new place. I am going to use Kubler- Ross's stages – thinking about Cherokee Park – and see if maybe a white elephant in the room. You can think about it.

1. Denial

Denial is the first stages of grief. It helps us to survive. We might think that Tim or whoever we don't have in our lives anymore - will eventually come back – if we just wait it out. Everything will soon be like it has always been. We might wonder why we should go on or if church makes sense anymore. When you start asking those questions, healing can happen. That is talking about the elephant. You become stronger, and the denial will start to fade. Be ready because all the feelings you have been denying - will come to the surface.

2. Anger

“How could he do this to us?” What in the world did someone say to him? Or certainly someone here is responsible for those who have left us. Most of us try to cover our grief by telling everyone it doesn't matter because he was here too long, he focused on the wrong things – or he just wasn't my kind of pastor anyway. Or they didn't fit in here anyway.

Anger is the touchy part of the healing process.

But – the more you feel it, the more you heal. Under anger is always pain. The curious part of grief in the church is this anger shows up in awkward ways.

You might blame someone: the interim pastor, someone on council, the custodian, or even Tim. It is ok to be angry Anger is finally about just how much you love.

3. Bargaining

We bargain. And look for any possible way to bring back what we lost. Please come back - we will change our worship service, our approach to mission, our Sunday school classes, or even the stained glass window. Maybe we bargain with God or the universe and promise to be nicer, increase our tithes – and pay better attention to each other - if only those who left will come back. We even enlist our friends, pastor – family to “talk some sense” into them.

Bargaining is all about the grief process.

4. Depression

Of course is depression, like anger, it is going to surface in many different ways: for example feeling exhausted all the time, not wanting to do anything, feeling disconnected from people even when you're with them, being on the verge of tears .

We can become apathetic or negative, too burned out to try anymore, not interested in whether the church lives or dies.

For churches, hopelessness **is our most pervasive and debilitating** problem.

I once read that our worst sin is despair. That is when we believe that nothing will ever be different than it is right now. Nothing will ever get better.

Hopelessness is the dark part of the healing and we have go through it.

5. Acceptance

Finally, the phase when we can make peace with our loss. It doesn't happen suddenly; it happens gradually, little bit by little bit, mixed it with our denial, grief, and anger. Acceptance doesn't mean everything is perfect now. Sadness will linger. Acceptance allows us to make peace with our loss, to release the relationship at least how it has been - and move forward with life. Sometimes it feels like this phase will never come, which usually means you're still struggling in the darkness. And that's ok.

My new friends, you are right where you are supposed to be.

The truth is you will probably never get over the loss for Tim or those who have left - but you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will move to the new place God is calling you. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same; nor would you want to."

I can't tell you how long this darkness will last - there are no time limits or hurrying the journey or a perfect way to do it. I expect it will take longer than this interim. Grief takes time and the only thing you can do is to pay attention.

New life is about to happen here at CPUC - but you and I will have to walk in the darkness first.

There is a story from the Sufi tradition about a man who cried “Allah! Allah!” until his lips became sweet with song. A skeptic heard him said, “Well, I have heard you calling out, but where is the answer to your prayer? Have you ever gotten a response? The man had no answer to that. Sadly, he abandoned his prayers and went to sleep. In his dreams he saw Khazir, the soul guide, walking toward him through a garden.

Why did you stop praising? The wise sage asked him. Because I never heard anything back – the man said.

Khazir told him - “This longing in your voice is the return message.

The grief you cry out from draws **you toward the union**. Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup. Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.

That whining is the connection. There are love dogs no one knows the names of. **Give your life to be one of them.** Only an idol always answers.

The God, who keeps silence, is the God beyond our control.

An answer will come, but not until the silence (darkness) is complete. And even then, the answer will be given in silence.

Listen to this other book of wisdom - Mark 13 is an odd text. We think it is about the of the world. the Apocalypse. But the writer is describing not how the world will be – but how it is now. Christian and the Jewish people lost their temple – and it was the center of their lives. It symbolized everything – and it was completely destroyed – no longer available – dead and gone - they couldn't do anything about it. The old passes away – now we how to live with it. I suggest starting with your grief. Mark gives us advice:

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert;^[a] for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

We are about to begin a new thing – We will walk this grief together - pay attention to the dark – because God is with us.

