

*What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. — Micah 6:8*

## On Grief and Grieving

### The Uses of Sorrow

*(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)*

Someone I loved once gave me  
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand  
that this, too, was a gift.

—Mary Oliver

Many of you know that our Bishop friend and pastor of our sister church in the Republic of Georgia, Malkhaz, suffered a terrible loss several months ago. A young man that Malkhaz had taken in as a child and raised was tragically shot and killed. Benjamin was a strikingly handsome young man. On my visit to Tbilisi two years ago, he and his wife had just welcomed their first child into the world. Benjamin glowed as he showed us pictures of his newborn. Several times during my visit when I needed something from the store, it was Benjamin who would accompany me. His graciousness, hospitality, and kindness on those days did not go unnoticed. There was a gentle spirit about Benjamin that was comforting and reassuring.

I have often heard it said that the loss of a child is one of the deepest losses that one can experience. While I have never found it helpful to compare losses, for Malkhaz, a man who has seen and experienced in his country so much loss and grief, the death of Benjamin has been devastating. With each email and phone call that I received from Malkhaz, I could sense the depth of his despair. Feeling his hurt and pain, I asked him one day if a visit would be helpful. Malkhaz, who is worse than I am at responding to emails, replied within two minutes, “Would you please come!” And so, on April 28 I will leave for England (Malkhaz is currently in Oxford working on his dissertation) to spend some time with our Bishop friend.

In preparation for my trip, I have been contemplating grief—what I have read about it and what I know about it from my experience and from being with many of you in your grieving. I’ve gone over in my mind the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I have reminded myself that we don’t go through these stages in a linear fashion. But rather we move in and out of them in a circular or spiral movement. I have also reminded myself that everyone grieves differently and while there are certain aspects of grief that we all experience, no two people move through their grief in the same way. I have imagined saying to Malkhaz that grief is a

process that takes time; that we can’t rush it; that we must go through it allowing ourselves the space to feel it; and that some days the best we can do when we are grieving is to simply keep trying to put one foot in front of the other.

Mahan Siler once told me that grief is like standing in the ocean with our back to the sea. Some days a wave will come along and gently brush against our legs reminding us of our pain and loss. Other days, a wave will come and our knees will buckle, dropping us to the ground. And then there are those days when that big wave comes and takes us all the way under—leaving us gasping for our breath. And the thing about these waves is that we rarely know when they are coming, and if the next one will be a gentle reminder of our grief or one of those overpowering waves that takes us all the way under.

It is a hard word to hear that our grief can be a gift, too. But I think Mary Oliver’s poem reminds us that even in our darkest times, even in the depths of our deepest despair and grief, there is something to hold on to. Maybe our grief work is finding what that something is. I ask for your prayers as I journey to sit with our friend Malkhaz as he tries to find what that something is for himself.

—Nancy

