

Counting Our Losses and the Folly of Comparative Suffering

Ken Wilson October 24, 2021

Next Sunday is the feast of All Saints, when churches traditionally take time to remember those who have passed on. So, we're going to expand our All Saints Sunday to include the many disruptions and losses we have experienced during this pandemic so far.

That service will feature a Litany of Lament. Maybe an unfamiliar term since we are living in a lament-avoidant society. Emily has been collecting our responses to the handouts provided (via email) to get sense of how the pandemic has affected us in so many different ways, depending on our circumstances, so we can acknowledge the losses and the consolations along the way.

Still time to contribute to that. If you're not one for handouts, can just send Emily an email saying, "here's a loss that really affected me this year, and/or here's an example of an unexpected consolation or blessing over the past year too." Not for public consumption—to give us a sense of the whole range of experiences over this past year. BTW, If you're tuning in virtually next Sunday, you're invited to bring a candle to light as memorial candle. If you're attending the in-person service memorial candles will be there.

I grew up in the wake of massive tragedies that no one really talked much about. Holocaust survivors kept their pain to themselves, as did returning war vets, compounding my country's inability to reckon honestly with its white supremacy, crimes against indigenous people and the rest. In my little cultural bubble, the basic approach to a death in the family was some version of "they are in a better place, best not to dwell on your loss" Which would be great if it worked.

Scripture offers a refreshing alternative to this script. Today consider Exhibit A and Exhibit B

Exhibit A: the Psalms. There are many psalms of lament—here's an example from Ps. 12-13: *How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I have*

prevailed”; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. May the Lord cut off all lying lips, those who say, “With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own!” Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the Lord; I will place them in the safety for which they long.”

100 of 150 Psalms refer to suffering induced by enemies. Focus is not on famine, drought, plagues or illness. Mostly the anguish caused by enemies, including the most painful kind, betrayal of friends. Enemies in the broadest sense—whole range of hostilities, not just threats to life and limb. As you read these Psalms you’ll notice it’s all pretty raw, unvarnished--no attempt to be “balanced” or “nuanced.” It’s as though we humans have a basic need to express our distress without all that equivocating—expressing pain and suffering the way it’s experienced when we lack sleep and are running on empty. Reading Psalms over many years, and noticing my own reaction to these laments (gee isn’t that a little overboard?), has helped me understand I have this need too—to express my suffering the way I experience it and not the way I think I’m supposed to experience it. These ancient writings offer tacit permission to be more real about suffering than my upbringing modeled.

Maybe some of you can relate: the main strategy I learned for dealing with suffering was to minimize it. Mostly by reminding myself others had it so much worse. Brené Brown has a term for this approach: “comparative suffering.”

Quoting from a summarize of a podcast on this: *Brown recently spoke of comparative suffering in relation to the current Covid-19 pandemic. She noted that when people operate from a place of fear and scarcity, they are more vulnerable to comparative suffering. For example, people working from home might compare themselves to workers on the front lines and decide that they don’t deserve to complain. When people assess their own suffering and decide it doesn’t measure up to others, they block their natural reactions to events, including the feelings they have. (Therapy) THEY BLOCK THE FEELINGS THEY HAVE. That means the feeling don’t metabolize, pass through us...they park in our bodies to quietly fester.*

And here’s a corollary: Comparative suffering also makes people inhibit natural ways of celebrating a success—only that backfires, too, because celebrating our successes makes us more resilient when dealing with failures and misfortunes. The ancient

cultures that produced the Bible normalized some horrible approaches, but also had some healthier approaches.

In the Psalms the only comparative suffering is the complaint, “Lord why don’t the arrogant wicked suffer like the rest of us? Why do they get off so easy?” But you never hear, “Oh Lord, I’m hurting bad, but I have to remember others are worse off than I am so I should count my blessings!”

Next Sunday, I think we’ll have a more honest, a more meaningful experience together if we begin with the intention to leave aside comparing our suffering over the past 18 months, with the suffering of others. It’s just not helpful. It doesn’t make us more sensitive to the suffering of others. It’s just something we use to deaden feeling.

If Exhibit A is the Psalms, Exhibit B is today’s reading from Galatians.

Galatians is among the earliest writings we have from the Jesus movement rooted in ancient Judaism. We know it’s written by Paul, probably around 50 CE—so it’s earlier than the 4 gospels, whose authors, except perhaps Luke (an associate of Paul) are unknown. In Galatians Paul is writing to gatherings of Jesus followers—mostly Jewish, but in the region of Galatia, with lots of non-Jews getting drawn in. It’s clear these Gentiles know they are participating in a Jewish movement. Paul is right in the thick of things—with no understanding that what he’s writing will later be regarded as Scripture. But he’s writing in a very Jewish way because he’s comfortable with paradox, as evidence in our reading today. Which I think it might be helpful as a background for our time together next Sunday.

Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ ... All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads (Gal. 6) A few comments ...

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” is paradoxically paired with ***“For all must carry their own loads.”*** With this testing our own work in the middle. What’s going on here? The summary of the law that Jesus adopted, echoing other well-known sages of his era (Hillel) was “love your neighbor as yourself”—he was so fond of it, that it came to be regarded by his followers as the law of Christ. The first part of the paradox is obvious: we can lighten each other’s loads in all sorts of ways. We can help

each other, send meals when a new baby is born, or someone is newly grieving a heavy loss. We can do simple gestures of love that make a real difference. We can express empathy instead of the chippy “look on the bright side.” When we acknowledge another person’s pain we ease it for them, we don’t make it worse. In all these ways and more, we fulfill the law of Christ: these ordinary acts are spiritual deeds. So the first side of the paradox is “A shared sorrow is a lightened sorrow.”

But **“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ”** is paired with **“For all must carry their own loads.”** We can lighten each other’s loads, but each has their own load to carry, the second part of the paradox. It too is obvious: If I have insomnia, you can’t say, “Oh! Well, I’m a good sleeper, I’ll go take a nap for you right now.” We can share our loads and the sharing lightens them, but there is also an aloneness to suffering. Paul is dancing with the same wisdom Brené Brown describes as the folly of “comparative suffering”: the fact that someone else has a heavier load than we do doesn’t make our load an ounce lighter, for all must carry their own loads. Both realities are true at the same time: there is a real aloneness in all suffering, but we can bear each other’s burdens ... and lightened them in the process.

Just to keep the Brené Brown rolling—remember the other way comparative suffering works? It keeps us from celebrating our successes. The comparative logic goes, Yes, I guess I did fine at this or that, but others are so much better. Paul’s not singing that song. He’s advocating taking pride in a job well done. **“All must test their own work, then that work, rather than their neighbors will be a cause for pride.”** He’s not dissing pride, he’s assuming there’s a good time and place for it. Ancient wisdom not fake piety.

Especially when we’re under stress, unless we’re blissfully oblivious narcissists, we can readily tune into our faults, failures, flaws. The pressures of pandemic have no doubt intensified our awareness of them. Couples bickering more. Parents becoming the parents they vowed not to be. I’ve noticed my lame insecurities are really heightened. It’s like middle school all over again.

It’s the fried marble. You put a marble in ice water, then drop it into boiling water and it remains intact as a sphere, but fractures internally—along predetermined molecular lines that were invisible until the added stress revealed them. Obviously I love the fried marble metaphor.

But in the middle of our inevitable cracking under pressure in different ways, we've done some things well. If you had said at the beginning of 2020, "Oh btw, we're going to stop meeting in person for a year and half," I would have said, "Well that's the end of our beautiful experiment called blue ocean." But it's not. We've worked hard to stay connected, to bear each other's burdens at a time when the burdens increased, and when offering support to others is more difficult. I think we're allowed to take pride in that. From one perspective, we're limping along. From another, wow! How are we doing this?

So a final thought: Maybe between now and next Sunday you could ask the Spirit, or Sophia, or Jesus, or Creator, or Mother or Father, or yourself, to show you how you have risen to this crazy occasion we are all living through. And bring that with you on Sunday too. *Amen.*