

“Why I Hate the End of September”

New London UMC

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Psalm 4 #741 UMH; Jeremiah 8:18—19:1 *The Message*

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I know I am not alone in having personal days of remembrance. But where those days fall on the calendar is different for each of us. For me, one of those times is the end of September, which I hate. But it wasn't always this way. September had been a rather celebrative month in our family, starting with my sister's birthday on September 1; my father's birthday on September 19; and my parent's wedding anniversary on September 29. September was a month of pies and cakes; the last days of the Walworth County Fair; and the first days of school. I had nothing to complain about the month of September.

But in 1998 when we had that very hot Summer with so many 100° days, I can remember driving down the highway with the windows open on my car – because the car did not have air conditioning. And I did a lot of driving that Summer because my father wasn't doing well. Cancer had spread into his skeletal system and he was in a lot of pain and taking morphine to manage it. At that time morphine could only be administered in a supervised setting, so he was staying in the long-term care unit attached to the nearest hospital. He died there on September 10. The memorial service was on September 17. His birthday would have been celebrated on September 19. Mom was alone for their wedding anniversary on September 29.

By 2001 it was becoming clear that my mother was having memory issues that impacted decisions she was making. For example she had decided not to pay the property insurance bill on the house and farm because she felt she had already paid them enough money over the years. Granted that probably seemed true, but it wasn't helpful to be without even liability coverage. I set up an appointment to meet with the insurance adjuster at Mom's house mid-afternoon on the same day that I needed to be in Sun Prairie in the morning for a meeting. I figured I'd do the circle tour from Appleton, to Sun Prairie, to Alden, and back to Appleton. The day happened to be September 11, 2001. By that afternoon both the insurance adjuster and I were just going through the motions, and he agreed to a new policy to at least cover the house. It as a small positive development on what was a very negative day. But from then on my mother's dementia continued to increase. Six years later she died on September 28, 2007, the day before her wedding anniversary.

There have been some years when it has felt like I've gone through the whole month of September just holding my breath, waiting for the pounding waves of grief to stop, and longing for the month to finally end. So I can appreciate the depth of grief that the prophet Jeremiah must have been experiencing when he wrote:

*I drown in grief. I'm heartsick. . . . Are there no healing ointments in Gilead?
. . . I wish my head were a well of water and my eyes fountains of tears
so I could weep day and night for casualties among my dear, dear people.*

(Jeremiah 8:18, 22a; 9:1 The Message)

All of us have known so many dear, dear people. Dear people who have been part of our lives. Dear people that we continue to grieve over. And even when that grief changes over the years, our connection to these dear people remains. Yes, it is our experience of grief over our own dear people which opens our hearts to the massive outpouring of grief from people around the world upon the death of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8. We understand their deep sense of “needing to do something” – be it bringing flowers to a memorial, offering a prayer, or silently crying as a hearse drives by. We have worked our way through similar passages in our own grief. But I don’t think any of us can imagine how truly difficult these days have been for the Queen’s family members as they have tried to both grieve and lead – while hemmed in by royal protocol and expectations of duty, and under the acute observation and barrage of wide-ranging speculation by the international press corps assigned to cover the many events related to the Queen’s death. I for one can only applaud the members of the royal family for being able to get up each morning to stand in the public eye with cameras recording their every move.

I would not wish such an intensely intrusive presence on anyone mourning the death of a loved one, because everyone needs privacy and space to mourn in. Even the writer of Psalm 4 notes of God that, “You have given me room when I was in distress.” (*Psalm 4:1b*) It is a good thing to have some elbow room around us when we feel overwhelmed and distraught. The emotional overload can certainly feel claustrophobic – which is why we often say that we need to get some air. We need to find an open area where we can safely let those emotions out. We need our space. But we also need to know that God hears us when we cry, when we call, when we shout, when we pray, when we fall silent and spent. God listens and gives us attention as well as space. It is comforting to know that God is with us in the midst of our sorrow. But perhaps it is even more comforting to remember that God has also been with us in our days of joy, and in all of our days of normal comings and goings. God has been there through the whole 360 degrees of the circle of our days and nights, every day and every night. And God will continue to be with us.

So no matter what day it is, no matter what month we’re in, no matter how fresh or seasoned our grief may be, what remains constant is God’s love holding us. We are held in God’s love. We can always trust that God will hold onto us through the dark night of the soul and into the dawning of a new day where joy breaks into our heart once again. But if there should come a time when we cannot remember this truth for ourselves, then we must rely on those around us to tell us how this has been true for them – and that it can also be true for us. For if we cannot feel how God’s love is holding us, we can feel the love of the people around us right now. It is our care for one another that can make manifest God’s care for us. And it is our love, working together with God’s love, that becomes the balm which is needed to make the wounded whole.

Amen.