

One of Love's Challenges: When A Loved One is Suffering

When someone we love is suffering, it's an incredible challenge. Love tells us to do whatever we can do to help our loved one. And many of us think that if we are just good enough, and work hard enough, we can fix it. So we work and work. And we suffer and suffer.

One of the most powerful aids to us at such times is the caring and love of others. Just as our loved ones may be leaning on us, so we too can be sustained by leaning on others' love when we are struggling with the suffering of someone we love. Our hymns this morning highlight the comfort that companionship and presence can bring us, especially when we can share with others the burden our love is placing on us. Our spiritual home, if it is worthy of that name, will provide such fellowship and community – it will help us to know that we are not alone. Is there anything more than fellowship, though, that can help us then?

There is, and Oliver's poem, the reading this morning, points to it. Loving, holding tight, and letting go is the substance of our lives. But it is so hard. When is the time to let it go? How can it ever be that time?

Let me tell you a story about love and holding and letting go...

A long, long time ago, when the Greek Gods lived in a cloud palace above Mount Olympus, the God Apollo and the muse of music, Calliope, had a son named Orpheus. Orpheus learned to play the lyre and became such a wonderful musician that nothing could withstand the power of his music. Wild beasts were calmed by the strains of his lyre, and gathered round him without strife, entranced by his music. Even the rocks were softened by his notes.

Orpheus and a nymph named Eurydice fell in love and were married, but shortly after their marriage, a demi-God saw Eurydice and tried to kidnap her. As she fled from him, she stepped upon a snake in the grass, was bitten in the foot, and died.

Orpheus sang of his grief to all, both gods and men. But his grief was not eased, and he resolved to do what no one had done before – to go seek his wife in the land of the dead and to bring her back.

He descended by a cave into the underworld. After passing through crowds of ghosts, he reached the King and Queen of the underworld.

There playing on his lyre, he sang,

“O gods of the underworld, to whom all we who live
must come, hear my words, for they are true.

I seek my wife, who was killed much too young by a poisonous snake. Love has led me here, Love, a god all-powerful with we who dwell on the earth. We all are destined to pass

to your domain. She too, will rightly be yours some day. But till then, please, grant her to me, I implore you.”

Do you recognize yourself in this story, or someone you love? Someone who would or has or perhaps is doing whatever they could to save a loved one from their terrible suffering? Love challenges us to do whatever we can for those we love, and Love can be a hard taskmaster.

Love can be a hard taskmaster:

When our mother is staying in her house for longer and longer stretches of time, yet when we go to visit, the house is so stuffed with papers and junk that there is almost no place to sit down.

Love can be a hard taskmaster:

When our son is facing a possible prison sentence, and a criminal record, because he got involved in dealing drugs.

Love can be a hard taskmaster:

When our spouse is dying, and he is so angry.

Love can be a hard taskmaster:

When our younger sister is drinking more and more, we're sick of covering up for her, and nothing any of us do seems to make a difference.

Welcome to hell. We watch our loved ones as they slide into that world of pain and suffering, and the pain is real for all of us. We watch them slide into their hell, and we are pulled by our affection and empathy and concern inexorably toward that destination, too. Until we stand at its gates, looking at our loved one disappear into the dark smoky mess, and wonder if we too are about to be pulled in after them.

Welcome to hell. Where powerlessness and despair rule, and grief holds constant audience.

For Orpheus, going into hell worked, at least it seemed to!

As he sang his song pleading for Eurydice's life, the ghosts shed tears and the terrors and punishments of the underworld ceased for a time. Undone by his music, the queen and king gave way. Eurydice was called and came limping with her wounded foot. Orpheus was permitted to take her away on one condition that he should not turn around to look at her till they reached the land of the living.

Imagine, Orpheus leads Eurydice up towards life, back to the world as we know it. He's got to be thinking – YES!! Everything is ok now!!

We have had similar moments, haven't we? When we've kept the faith, been optimistic and done all we can do, and it looks like it is working, it really is working this time.

The point after the family intervention with our sister. She seemed to accept what we were saying, and went to detox voluntarily. YES!

So Orpheus, he had to be thinking **Yes** as he led Eurydice in silence upward through dark and steep passages from the underworld. They had nearly reached the light-washed world of human life when Orpheus, in a moment of forgetfulness, of slight frailty, of imperfection, a moment in other words of complete humanity ... When Orpheus cast one little glance behind him. And that was it. Instantly, Eurydice was swept away. Though the lovers instinctively stretched out their arms to each other, they grasped only the air.

Now, Orpheus had worked really hard and was incredibly devoted to Eurydice. He had held Eurydice “tight against his bones knowing, his own life depended upon her.” But in the end, he messed up, didn’t he? I mean, one little glance and, boom, she was dead. Again.

He was completely devastated, of course. He blamed himself.

But reality is more complicated, harder to know, than what Orpheus perhaps understood. He thought his lover’s fate was in his hands. So he condemned himself after his failure because of an illusion.

Because another’s fate is never totally in our hands. Never. Sure, to the listener of this story, it sounds as if Orpheus had a shot, like he could have saved her. But we don’t really know, do we? What if there was another bigger story that he was unknowingly a part of, maybe a spell cast near the cavern entrance long ago, before the underworld even had a king and a queen....

Orpheus got it wrong. He thought he was the hero of the story, and then, when Eurydice died again, he couldn’t adjust to the reality that Eurydice was gone. Because he got it wrong, he blamed himself, and just suffered and suffered until finally someone ended it all for him.

And that’s one of the dangers of overstating our own role in someone else’s suffering or life. We blame ourselves, and cannot get down to the thing that is really causing us pain, which is our grief at the reality of the situation. Grief is hard enough to let ourselves feel, harder still if we are distracting ourselves with lots of blame.

You might be thinking, “Yes, I have felt like him sometimes. I tried this, I tried that, but the mistakes I made when he was younger, or the thing I said wrong to him the other day... I could have made it turn out differently. ... Maybe I still can...”

Our sister is out of detox now, but she’s drinking again. She wants to come live with me, she has nowhere else to go, how can I let her live on the streets? How can I let her live with me?

Perhaps Orpheus’ problem was that he had gone into hell, but hadn’t heeded the warning over the gates. You know, the one that Dante wrote of in his book *The Inferno*.

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here. Inscribed, according to Dante, on the gates to Hell.

He hadn't abandoned all hope.

Now, by hope, I don't mean the knowledge that there are many possibilities in every situation, and the knowledge that good outcomes may well come from your work and the circumstances of life.

No, by *hope* I mean the illusion that our experience right now could be any different from what it is. I mean the *hope* that is a fierce grasping for particular outcomes, combined with a rejection of the truth that suffering is normal.

Because, honestly, we don't suffer because of our personal failures – suffering comes with our lives, as does change. The reality is that everything is constantly changing, and yet at the level of personal experience, we deny this, and then we suffer. We try to hold on to feeling good, but our feelings go up and down and all around. And when we feel sad or bad, our pain is made worse by the fact that we resist those feelings we label as bad.

This need to label, too, does not help us. Our suffering at our loved one's suffering can be reduced when we can step back a little, stop being so quick to label.

There's an old story about a family who had only one child. They were very poor. The child was extremely precious to them, especially because someday he would bring them some financial support. Then he was thrown from a horse and crippled. It seemed like the end of the parents' lives, the end of their hopes for security. Two weeks after that, the army came into the village and took away all the healthy young men to fight in a war, and this young man was allowed to stay behind and take care of his family.

Life is like that. We say something is good. We decide something bad. But we really don't know.

Wait a minute, some of you are thinking. Wait a minute! How can alcoholism or schizophrenia or disability be possibly considered anything but bad? But listen, maybe there is a gift to come out of the situation, to someone. I remember what happened to my own mother. She was not a very good mother, she was in a great deal of pain herself when she was a younger parent. But when her cancer came back, much later in her life, she said to us, "I didn't do a very good job of showing you how to live, but I will show you how to die." She found a gift in the pain she had experienced and caused.

Good, or bad, we really don't know. Perhaps both.

When two things appear contradictory and are both true – that is paradox. And paradox, paradox is our friend. We need our optimism and energy to take up Love's challenge, to try and help the person we love. And we also need to enter the seeming hell of uncertainty, change, and letting go of outcomes. Paradox, living with a foot in both camps – can provide a way of balance through the darkness and the suffering.

When we can let go of grasping fiercely for certain outcomes of our efforts and a loved one's efforts, we can stand face to face with the real situation. We can accept the notion that suffering isn't unusual, that change is the fundamental truth of life, and that feelings that we label good and bad will all come and go. We can take comfort in the reality that we are not so big and important, but only small footnotes in many stories much larger than our own.

My friends, if we can accept Love's challenge to help our loved one with hope – gently held – for the best, balanced by deep acceptance that we really aren't in control, and with a loosened grip on the need for this or that outcome, then ... we can reduce our own suffering as we try to help.

Mary Oliver wrote:

“To live in this world
you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones
knowing your own life depends upon it;

And when the time comes to let it go,
To let it go.”

We might adapt Oliver's meaning just a bit. We can accept one of Love's greatest challenges, helping someone we love wholeheartedly with hope for the best. And we can reduce our suffering along that path if we live the paradox of doing the three things Oliver mentions – loving, holding and letting go – not one after the other, but all at once.

May it be so.
Amen.