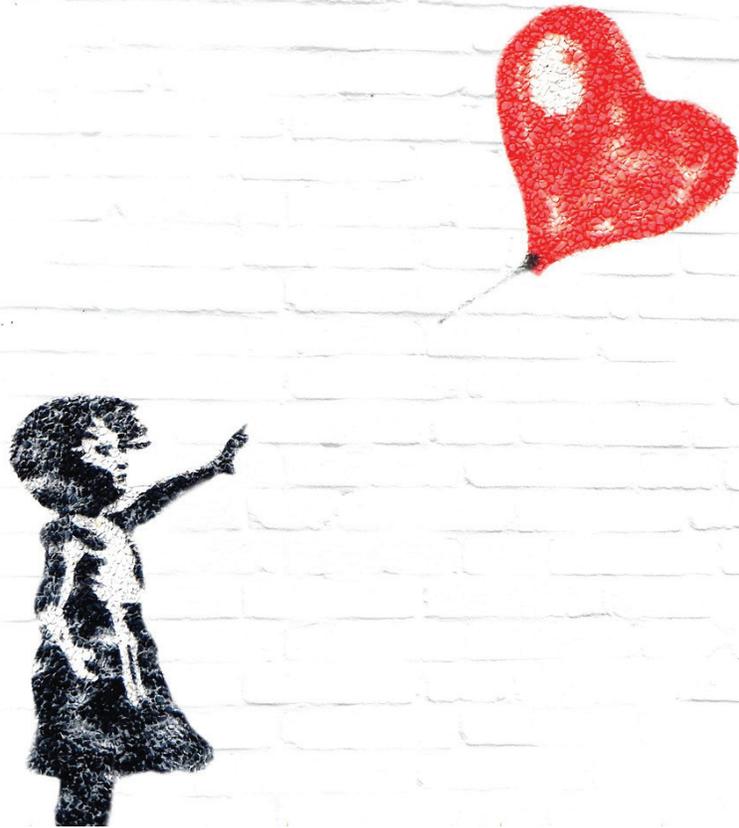


THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



LOSS

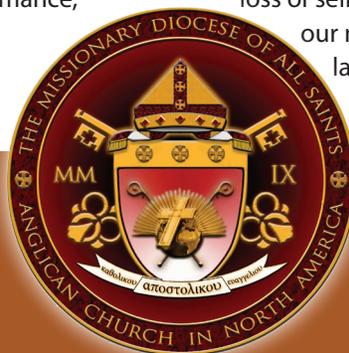
By Bishop Winfield Mott

Life for all humans, and for many other creatures besides, is marked by loss. We don't usually think of it that way, and it would be very depressing to define life as a continual experience of loss. Yet, there it is. Fortunately, it is not the only experience of life, but it is nevertheless continuous and defining. Perhaps it begins with tears over the loss of the womb and its comfort, thrust into a new, different and upsetting world. It ends with tears of goodbye, as we lose those we love and the world we know to enter yet another unknown realm.

In between, we experience a myriad of loss; of a friend moving away, of a house or neighborhood or school class when we ourselves are moved, the breakup of a teen romance, the death of a pet, a miscarriage or stillbirth, the death of grandparents, parents, other family, the loss of a job, the major grief of losing a spouse,

a child, a close friend. There are losses when things change: neighborhoods, favorite spots for recreation, theaters, museums or community halls closed, treasured ways of doing things. There are losses caused by fire, flood and other disasters, natural and human-caused. Recently, we have experienced the losses due to COVID.

A different category of loss involves loss of memory, as with dementia, loss of function, as happens with degenerative disease, loss of vision or hearing. America's first nations (aka Indigenous, Indians, Native Americans) are trying to build back after loss of culture, heritage, language and the consequent loss of self-worth and human dignity. Many other peoples in our nation have experienced similar losses of culture, language, and heritage, and often do not even understand what they have lost.



Our Core Value is:

"The Convocation of the West is Missionary, bringing people to Christ and meaningfully engaging in the transformation of the culture around us."

The Vision of the Convocation is:

*"To STRENGTHEN existing churches;
To PLANT new churches; and
To RAISE UP missional leaders."*

There are also those who have lost their church. Perhaps it was because their church changed and no longer is a community representing Christianity and manifesting the Gospel, perhaps it was lost because individuals within it failed to mirror Christ in their actions, perhaps it is the person himself or herself who has lost their faith, or perhaps it simply was no longer a priority until apathy disconnected the ties that bind.

Sometimes the loss is self-inflicted, a quarrel ending a friendship, a marriage ending in divorce, a congregation rent asunder by disputes. Sometimes, of course, the loss happens despite our best efforts, by forces beyond our control.

In all of this, the natural response is grief. We often fail to recognize the role that loss and grief continually play in our lives, from the tears of a small child who has dropped an ice-cream cone into the dirt to the sense of profound emptiness caused by the death of someone you deeply loved. Grief, especially if unrecognized, often manifests as anger, hostility towards others, poor decisions and judgement, withdrawal, denial or other indirect expressions.

successfully channeling the unrecognized grief into blaming the Jews and expressing hatred towards them. In America, a middle class demographic is experiencing a loss of generational upward mobility, diminished economic power and the disorientation of changing cultural patterns and norms. It is also a people ripe for the leadership of a demagogue.

Perhaps the most pathetic is the loss of church, now very common. It is the one channel which gives access to healing the grief. Most churches have failed to respond effectively to the changes in society over the past two centuries. Some churches have tried to become “relevant” by following all the trendy notions of society. In the process, they have lost the faithful Christians within them, whereas the secularized world regards them as redundant, and follows more interesting and compelling cheerleaders of the “trendy.” Other churches respond by going into “ghetto” mode (think of Rod Dreher’s Benedict option). It is the way churches have dealt with periods of persecution, past and present. Since the mandate of Christ is to “go into all the world,” emphasis on “all,” to make disciples, this kind of retreat

into ourselves can never be more than a temporary strategy. For instance, the Russian Church used this during the Communist era, but immediately upon that regime concluding, consciously returned to permeating and leading Russian culture, integrated as the soul of the nation.

All Saints Day (Nov.1) is a day to contemplate loss. We remember all who we have lost, a day of organized grief and emotional pain. But All Saints Day, although it begins with remembering and grief, does not leave us there. Instead, it lifts our eyes beyond loss to the day beyond time, when “God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17). Gathered in the immense host covered in white, we stand before the throne, for the first time in our lives experiencing no more loss. We have been living in an imperfect world, stained by our sin and loss of

innocence. That life inevitably has produced a harvest of losses and consequent sadness. It is only as we are absorbed fully into the very Body of Christ that we are fulfilled as human beings and can become what we were meant by God to be. It is then that our tears are wiped away. We have gained forever what can no longer be lost. Today, while still on the rocky road of earthly, sinful life, losses come to us in all forms. The message of All Saints Day is that, by the grace of God, we can endure and transcend the losses, to reach the eighth day, the day without loss. “He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments and I will not erase his name from the book of life” (Rev. 3:5).



Painting of saints by Fra Angelico
Public Domain

Our society accepts grief in response to death, and accommodates it, up to a point. But we seldom grasp the role of loss and grief in regard to other aspects of life. As a result, we are shaped, individually and collectively, by unrecognized inner currents driving us in negative directions. A good example is the German experience between the two World Wars. The nation lost the war and in so doing, its pride and confidence in itself. Individuals were impacted through the heavy loss of life, along with familiar structures, the collapse of the economy and consequent job loss and loss of material comfort, and loss of the usual order and security of life. The genius of Adolf Hitler was in

New Year's Resolution

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

When I was a young man in the late 1970s, studying English literature in college, there was a poem by William Butler Yeats that struck me to the core and has always remained with me. Yeats published this poem 100 years ago in 1921, when the world was trying to make sense of World War I. But, of course, the true tragedy of that war is that it really made no sense. It was a period when society went mad and when pride and rigid positions caused the complete destruction of the social order. The poem is called "The Second Coming", and I quote here only the first stanza:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Sound familiar? It is true that the more things change, the more they stay the same. I also think this poem may capture well the mood of many of our churches today, which brings me to the thrust of this article.

One of the priests in our Western Convocation sent a link to a Christian Evangelical presenter. His name is Aaron Renn and the title of the video on YouTube is "Priority of Owned Space." Although I do not agree with everything presented, and although it views everything from an Evangelical point of view, it caused me to think. And one of his best parts is his interpretation as to the changes in our society. I also think he captured the mentality of the continuing Anglican Churches when he spoke of the conservative's reaction to conflict as being "flight", not "fight" – though we all know those who stayed and fought as well.

In Mr. Renn's presentation, he divided our recent history into three periods as it relates to Christianity and our society. The first period he stated is the period before 1994, and he calls this period "positive". What he contends is that our society, generally speaking, was positive towards Christianity. The high mark of

attendance at church was in the 1950s, Christian norms and societal norms were the same, and the culture viewed Christianity in a positive light. When things started to change in the 1960s, there developed a fight-back mentality. And in the 1970s the idea of a Moral Majority was born. There were two characteristics of this period. First, it was highly oppositional to secular culture; and second, those leading the movement were far from what we would call "in the cultural centers".

The second period he called the "neutral" period, and he dated it from 1994 until 2014. Now, the reason he chose 1994 is because that is when Rudy Giuliani was elected mayor of New York City and started his program of reclaiming the city, making it more dynamic and attractive to people to move back from the suburbs. The reason Mr. Renn calls it neutral is because society started viewing Christianity, not as a positive, but not as a negative either. It was important to people but not to our society, and the culture viewed it more like an affectation as opposed to an important value system. This all fed into a pluralistic view of society.

The Christian response was similar. Churches sought cultural engagement rather than opposition. Churches were very positive to secular culture, or at the very least, not hostile. Thus churches stressed areas of agreement and play down areas of conflict. It is also when the idea of the "Seeker Friendly" church took off.

It is important also to note that the notion of the Seeker Friendly Church really started during the positive period, and some of the positive notions still existed when it took off. As a result, the Seeker Friendly idea was predicated on the belief that, given an option, people would prefer going to church than not. All they needed was the "right" kind, one that didn't drive them away. The other thing that the Seeker Friendly churches sought out was the elite cultural centers, like big cities, thus playing into what was happening with the inner city under mayors like Rudy Giuliani. They used things like webpages, and often engaged with the elite secular culture through news and politics.

Finally, the last period, the one we are living in now, is from 2014 and is the "negative" period. Mr. Renn calls it negative



because now society and our culture have become hostile towards Christianity. The elite see Christian morality as a threat. In other words, for those born during the baby boom, we have seen our society move from seeing Christianity as a plus and going to church a necessity to a society that sees Christianity as a threat that must be neutralized and a growing portion of our society seeing absolutely no need to attend church.

What is worse is that Mr. Renn sees no strategy yet for combating this change except for Rod Dreher in his Benedict Option, and Doug Wilson's solution that he has instituted in Moscow, Idaho. Mr. Renn then spent the rest of the presentation presenting his interpretation of Mr. Wilson's method, which Mr. Renn called the "Owned Space" option. This is where I shall depart with Mr. Renn. Although his notion is interesting, it is also very typically American. It is all a matter of ownership of space at a strategic point. (A strategic point is where that which is important is also feasible to achieve.)

There was one additional idea though that I thought was interesting. Mr. Renn said that Mr. Wilson obtained a critical mass for starting his church through a blog. Mr. Wilson did not shy away from controversy, and the result was that those who came to his church were like-minded. Additionally, and what Mr. Renn thought was important, was that this method also drove away anyone else who was not like-minded or, what he termed, the "mushy middle" – those who liked the church but preferred avoiding controversies and/or conflicts with society. By gathering people together like this, the church was successful in that it could reach critical mass and be self-supporting. And, as we all know, for missions reaching critical mass is very important.

But I found the idea of only attracting like-minded people anathema to the concept of a parish church. This may be my own limitation, and I can see how initially when starting a church avoiding conflicts helps insure the church's survival. But, after the initial establishment, I cannot see how we can be true to the Gospel if we only want people who think as "we do" in our church. After all, we should not be the local chapter of the Republican Party in red states or the Democratic Party in blue states. We should not all dress alike, or look alike, or think alike – except for our love of Jesus! We should be reaching all for Christ. After all, wasn't that the point that Saint Paul was trying to make when he wrote:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake that I may be partaker of it with you. [1 Corinthians 9:19, 22b-23]

Additionally, Mr. Renn admitted that Mr. Wilson's Christ Church is more closely modeled on the "Moral Majority" concept than on any new way of looking at church in a negative society.

So, here is where we return to my friend Yeats. I believe Mr. Renn is right in that we are living in a "negative" society.

The center is not holding. We exist within a Christian Church, namely the Anglican Communion, which seems less and less receptive to the catholic order that we embrace. And our own churches, with a few exceptions, seem to be shrinking or vanishing. In our own beloved Convocation of the West, we have had two churches disband during the COVID Pandemic. Again, the center is not holding. So, what are we to do?

Mr. Renn thinks that most people who are of a "conservative" bend usually run away. They run away from the city centers to the suburbs. They run away from churches that have changed and form their own churches on the outskirts. And they avoid conflict. But, he asks, why can't we take the center's back?

As interesting and true as this may be there is one element in his equation that he never considers: what about God? What about Christ? What is He asking us to do?

We, being the falcons, must try to listen to our falconer, namely Christ. We need to become Christians capable of not only living the Gospel, but also living the Gospel in a hostile environment. We need to look to the past, to the early Church in Imperial Rome, to our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters living under Moslem rule, and to our brothers and sisters now living in China and other hostile areas. And we must learn.

But we must also learn to LISTEN. It is time we listen to that still, small voice of the Lord telling us where we are to go and what we are to do. We are to feed His sheep, and we are to go out, baptizing the nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And, in juxtaposition to my friend Yeats, please consider this section of Psalm 107 from our own 2019 BCP:

*"So when they cried unto the Lord in their trouble,
he delivered them out of their distress.*

*He sent his word and healed them,
and they were saved from destruction.*

*Oh, that they would therefore praise the Lord for his goodness
and declare the wonders that he does for the children of men!
That they would offer unto him the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and tell of his works with gladness!" [Psalm 107:19-22]*

As we approach the end of this year (liturgical, not calendar), I am calling for all of us, Clergy and Laity alike, to take stock. I want us all to pray, to fast, and, most of all, to listen for what the Lord is telling us. I want us all to pray that the Lord will lead us where He (not we) wants us to go. For, if this period of Pandemic time is truly a Sabbatical year of rest, we should now be ready to act, to move, and to be true ministers of the Word. And with the Lord through the Holy Spirit leading us, we cannot fail IF we continue to trust the Lord.

Amen and God bless,

The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

Vicar General for the Convocation of the West