

Elim Lutheran Church Petaluma, CA May 11, 2014 Easter 4

It is a privilege for us to be with you today. It is a particular delight for me to be in another Elim. I grew up in Elim Lutheran Church where my father was the pastor in Scandia Minnesota about 15 miles from White Bear Lake where Pastor Kellgren grew up. That church also had a replica of Torwaldsen's statue of Christ with open arms welcoming all. So it feels a little like coming home for me.

One more word about myself in order that you might understand a little about the major theme for the sermon. I have been a seminary professor of pastoral care from 1969 until December 2013. The primary area of focus for me both in teaching and writing has been grief and grieving. And so when I learned in talking with Pastor Kellgren that this would be the second Sunday after his retirement from 37 years as your pastor, I suggested that I might preach about grief – about how we mourn – because the retirement of a beloved pastor after so many years is the occasion for much grief. In our conversation, Pastor Kellgren agreed it would be good to talk about grieving his leaving and give you permission to mourn. I proposed that topic because it has been my experience that congregations – like families and other human systems – have a hard time grieving together for a loss they experience as a family or a congregation. And when human communities or systems do not grieve they may get stuck in patterns of interacting that are not creative.

Some of you may know this from your families. There may be a secret grief never spoken about for generations that becomes the elephant in the living room determining how the family functions. It is why great grandfather Lars fled Sweden. Or it may be about the church treasurer from the most prominent family who absconded with \$30,000 of contributions over years. In my mother's family there is a secret grief deeply buried and never spoken of. I think the secret is that a great aunt committed suicide in a mental hospital in western Minnesota at

the turn of the century. In order to keep that grief secret, we don't tell any stories in the family to make sure that THE story is not revealed inadvertently. The grief need not be shameful. Sometimes families are overwhelmed by too much loss and sadness – or they don't have the resources to cope with an ordinary loss and the grief is not acknowledged or shared simply because it is too much. And grief that is not shared is buried in the nooks and crannies of a body or a community.

Pastor Kellgren's retirement is a very ordinary kind of loss of a very remarkable ministry. If 350 people gather to celebrate his ministry, you know it was very special. He was here long enough to baptize, marry and bury people in the same family. Because he was such a vibrant leader who fashioned over the years an authentic and compassionate congregation, some of you may wonder – as the disciples did after the death of Jesus – how you will go on without his leadership. For some of you, there will be grief not easy to share with others for the times Pastor Kellgren shepherded you through dark times known only to you and him. There will also be complicated grief for those who had a complicated relationship with Pastor Kellgren. There are families – maybe you know them – that had a difficult time staying together after the matriarch died who had been the family glue. This congregation will not be the same without Pastor Kellgren – that is sure – and there is sadness and grief for that to acknowledge and share as well.

It was not until some time after I agreed to preach that it came to my attention that this is Mother's Day. On this day, we celebrate the gift of a mother's love and care. We recognize that for some mothers, that love included sacrifice – a willingness to set aside their own desires in order to respond to the needs of those they love. Kevin Garnett, in his speech accepting the MVP in the Professional Basketball Association, recalled how his mother would go to bed hungry to make sure the children had enough to eat. She was the MVP, he said. For other mothers, they were chief cheerleader and advocate – the one who always had your back, always encouraged you to do your best, always willing to pick you up when you stumbled. I heard from a former student in his 50's last week that his mother was seriously ill. "Mom has always been THE advocate

for me,” he wrote, “always understanding my changes and drives and always believing in me even when nobody else did.” Robert’s tribute is shared by many for whom Mom was always in your corner cheering you on to be all you can be.

Mother’s Day is also the occasion for sadness as we remember mothers who have died and whose presence is missed. And if your mother was your best friend in the later years, it was a double loss when she died. Mother’s day is also harder if your mother was not there for you when you needed her. And for some women mother’s day is a time of secret grief because they could not or did not become a mother. Mother’s day is a painful reminder of what they longed for and never had. It is often on occasions of celebration like Mother’s Day or a Farewell Party for a beloved pastor that joy cancels sadness – or at least we have a hard time holding these two deep emotions together.

To add more complexity to the sermon and our Sunday celebration, this is also designated as Good Shepherd Sunday. The 23rd Psalm is the source comfort for people who suffer or mourn or struggle with darkness in their lives – “who walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The Psalmist’s belief is simple: whatever our shadow of struggle or sorrow or suffering, we are not alone. God is with us to lead us to green pastures and still waters even when nothing in our life is peaceful or quiet and we feel all alone.

So there you have it. Three BIG themes. Grieving the loss of Tim Kellgren as your beloved pastor for 37 years, Mother’s Day with all the expectations it brings and Good Shepherd Sunday. I have never been able to juggle balls and I am not very good at keeping several ideas or thoughts in the air at the same time. But let’s see what we can do to put these three big themes together.

The promise of God’s presence as the Good Shepherd in the valleys of life is encouragement for us to mourn freely. You may have heard a biblical phrase from the apostle Paul used to discourage grieving – the one that says we “should not grieve as those who have no hope.” That grieving intensely when we

experience loss shows a lack of faith or trust in God who has promised life abundant and eternal. Not so, I believe. Christians **of all people** should feel free to mourn intensely for the losses we experience – because our HOPE IS IN GOD who walks with us through the shadows. We are free to grieve more, not less, because God will not leave us alone in our sadness – but rather suffers with us.

So – good and faithful people of Elim and all others in this community who have been touched by the wide-ranging ministry of Tim Kellgren – mourn your sadness at his retirement. Share your grief freely with one another. Tell one another the stories of how Pastor Kellgren touched your life – how he encouraged you to live abundantly. And then write him a note of grieving gratitude. You may even be mad he left just now because you hoped he would baptize a grandchild yet to be conceived or perform the wedding for a son who is not dating anyone or lead one more work project in Mexico because you never went or walk beside you as your father sinks deeper and deeper into Alzheimer's. That's ok. Anger is part of grief and we need not hide it. God understands our anger and so will Pastor Kellgren.

Pastor Kellgren's retirement has not only left a hole in the lives of individuals and in this faith community but in the city of Petaluma. That hole cannot be filled and perhaps should not be filled. Even God does not fill the emptiness. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it like this: "It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain." Our grief is important because it keeps alive our former communion with each other and reminds us how deeply we have loved. Families and congregations and other human communities are strongly tempted to fill the emptiness. Something new will be born out of the emptiness – but if we fill it too soon – we will only fail trying to replicate what has been and resist what will unavoidably change.

We grieve because we love and are loved. In that sense, grieving is inevitable for human folk because we are creatures who become attached even when we know that attachment is not forever. However much pain we feel from the loss of love, the prospect of not loving or being loved is even greater sadness and

deeper grief. Grief is born in the giving and receiving of love. When we lose that love, grief is a good friend that watches with us until we can love again. Or grief is the mid-wife to new life. Through grief we remember and conserve what has gone before until it becomes a past we cherish and we are free to embrace something new. Grief is not just our selfish response to missing someone we love: it is necessary for new life. We cannot hope again unless we grieve. Let me say that once more. We cannot hope again unless we grieve.

So today we mourn the departure of the beloved pastor of this community for 37 years and we celebrate mothers for who they are and what they do to foster abundant living. In all that we give thanks for the lives of remarkable and faithful companions – mothers and pastors and friends – who continue to walk with us through the shadows. However – But – Even so – Nonetheless or much better to say AND so as not to cancel out what has gone before - AND mothers and pastors and friends – however important – are all Under-shepherds of God who is the permanent, enduring, timeless, faithful guardian and protector of our souls. It is God alone who is the Good Shepherd. However much we might celebrate great pastors and remarkable mothers, God is the Good Shepherd who calls us by name and leads us out on new adventures the end of which we may not see now. The promise from Jesus in our sadness and our joy, in our mourning and celebrating is clear and simple. **I came, Jesus says, that you might have life, and have it abundantly.** That gracious promise is more than enough to sustain us this day and every day. Believe it and grieve.