

The Loss We Share, a homily for the Day of the Dead
By Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered November 2, 2014

Story: The Mustard Seed, a version may be found at <http://path.homestead.com/kisagotami.html>.

There were a lot of voices that Kisa Gotami heard.

In the beginning, I expect that she was surrounded by the voices of her family and their expectations for her marriage and her future. She had come from a poor family and through marriage had moved into a new one. I bet her family had a lot of hopes riding on her.

And her new family did also. As the story tells us, she was treated harshly in the beginning. She wasn't their status yet and was probably nothing but a question mark to them. Would she be able to bring their family honor? This all changed with the birth of her son.

What a day it was for her husband and his family. Reservations they had about Kisa gave way to the promise that her son represented. Voices of hope surrounded her, as well as legions of well-meaning advice. Dress him this way; feed him that; just make sure that our hopes are fulfilled.

But Kisa and her husband's family were in for yet another change. I can only try to imagine how much of Kisa's identity and her stability were wrapped up with her son, and they were torn away from her when he died. He had been the light of her life, and now that light had gone out.

Whether it's a death that's anticipated, at least to some extent, or if it's a death that's sudden and unexpected, like that of Kisa's son, the feelings of loss from a death can be overwhelming and can challenge one's ability to cope. It can carry with it a tsunami of emotions as well as often a tsunami of responsibilities and decisions for someone closer to us or someone who we have some responsibility regarding.

Kisa was utterly overwhelmed. She couldn't bear the emotions she was facing. I bet she couldn't bear to face her husband's family, or her own. Anything to change this. Anything to save me from this. Anything to make me feel like I did before, when he was alive.

And this logic led her onto the street begging for medicine to raise her son from the dead. You know, I can see where she's coming from, even if it doesn't make rationale sense to me now. In that time, the time of the Buddha, there was indeed a belief in magic and miracles that were capable of raising the dead. Five hundred years later, in the time of Jesus, this was something healers and magicians did, although it was unusual, raising the dead and healing by miracles. To think in her context, she saw the great illness in her son and sought a magical medicine to make it better. However, her search was driven by her grief – this is what held the greater need for healing.

The Buddha saw this when he saw her. When she first approached the monastery where he was staying, those in the yard saw her and avoided her. There she stood, old tears dried onto her cheeks and fresh ones flowing, the body of her son in her arms, and a look of desperation on her face. She felt utterly alone, and the monks and other in the town shied away from her.

Grief doesn't exactly draw people to you. How many of us are entirely comfortable with overflowing emotions? How many of us would have approached Kisa in her misery rather than shying away from her? I can't say I would have done anything except run in the opposite direction, and quickly.

Grief is isolating and lonely. Not only did others avoid Kisa but also she felt utterly alone in her experiences. When the Buddha looked into her eyes and into her soul, this is what he saw. This is what he saw needed medicine.

It'd be awfully nice if this medicine actually existed. If any of us knew what it was, the medicine that could cure loneliness and feelings of isolation, we'd be millionaires... and we'd get to help a lot of people too.

But we're not here alone today, to remember those we who have died. And Kisa wasn't alone either – she just didn't know it yet. This is where the mustard seed comes in. In the story, it represented what she couldn't find, a house that hadn't known death. It was the magic ingredient for the magic medicine that would never be made.

A mustard seed is a tiny thing, hardly larger than a good sized speck. It's been featured in one of Jesus's parables as well, as a tiny tiny seed that is capable of growing into a huge tree.

Every house she visited had mustard seeds. They were quite common for cooking in India. And every house she visited had known death. They had much in common with Kisa, and her journey is what helped her to see that. Experiences of death and loss are one of the many things that we share as humans. It's just not something that we're very good at talking about. We're usually fairly decent with it right after it happens, up through the funeral or memorial service, but after that, not really so much. That's when we run up against the myths of "getting over it" and how much time it "should" take to grieve and so on. But grief we share, and grief that can grow and add up over time, especially if we keep ourselves separated and alone in our feeling of it.

This is one of the things that I love about this service, our Day of the Dead celebration. Not only is it a celebration – look at all of the colors and joy here – but it's also a time when we bring our memories and experiences into this place, together. And not just recent ones – although those are especially precious today. We bring our whole selves here and our losses, both ones that weigh us down but also ones that do not but that are people special to us that we want to lift up today. This is what we're making the space for this morning with our ritual.

And remember, you are never all alone. May it be so.