

Sermon: Boxed In
Text: Luke 13:31-35
Date: March 17, 2018
Context: WWPC
 Third Sunday in Lent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt



I am quite sure that by now, most of you have heard my flood story often enough -- either from this pulpit or in person -- that you can tell it yourself.

But one aspect of the story that I often leave out is that my dog, Tammy, died that night. I tend to omit this detail because 238 people also died that night, so talking about the loss of my dog in that context seems inappropriate.

But I can assure you that as an eleven-year old boy who spend nearly every waking moment of every day with his sweet doggie, I loved Tammy nearly as much as I loved my mom and dad.

So it is surprising that I didn't grieve her death at the time. I was too overwhelmed with the enormity of the loss and devastation all around me: the loss of our home, the destruction of the lake and the park and the grounds where I paddled rowboats, picnicked with my family, and played with my cousins.

The death of several of my friends -- kids from the neighborhood and teammates from my baseball team.

The complete destruction of the baseball diamond where we played, ground that was every bit as sacred to me as a young boy as Yankee stadium is to the average New Yorker.

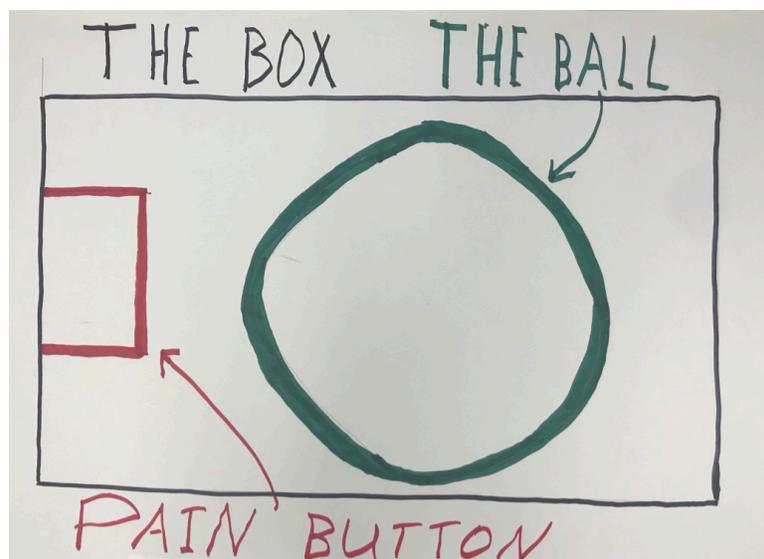
I was overwhelmed and numbed by it all. But twenty-five years later, on a ceremonial walk to commemorate that terrible night and to remember and honor loved ones who died, I took a carnation from a basket at the start of the walk, in memory of Tammy.

I carried it with me in my little daypack for about a mile as my sister and I strolled down the greenway that now runs parallel to Rapid Creek. But then -- and I hadn't planned to do this -- we crossed a bridge that spanned the creek very near the spot where Tammy likely drowned.

I stopped mid-way over the bridge, pulled the carnation from my pack and threw it into the creek. And immediately burst into tears. I turned to my sister, and when I could finally choke out the words, I said, "I've waiting been waiting twenty-five years to bury Tammy."

The lesson I learned that day is that we can carry grief around inside of us for years. I suspect you've learned that lesson, too, in your own way.

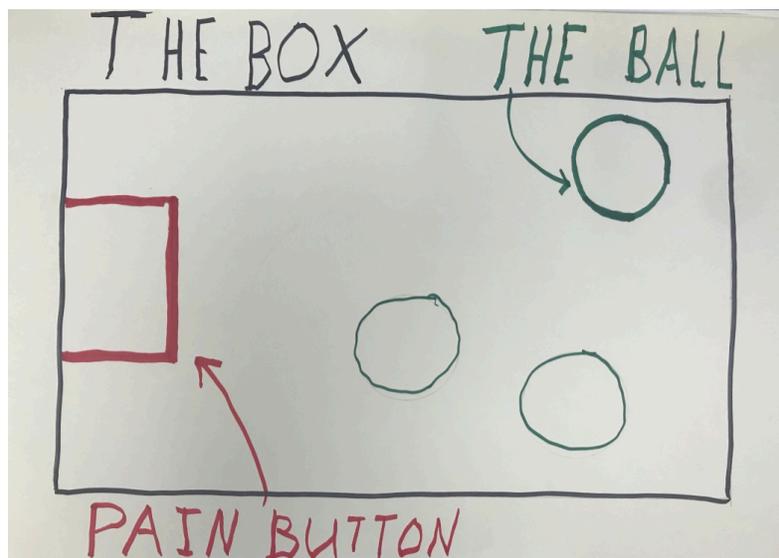
I saw an article recently by a writer named Elizabeth Cassidy that said grief is like a ball in a box with a pain button fixed to the inside. It looks something like this:



At first, when the pain is big and acute, you can't really move the box without the ball hitting that button.

But over time the ball gets smaller and smaller (above right), so it hits the button much less often. But it still hurts just as much when it does, even twenty-five years later. Of course, it's also true that the number of balls in the box builds up over time, as our losses mount.

So, like this:



Which is why we need the language and the practice of lament. Our culture is not proficient in this practice. We tend to keep the lid on our boxes closed, and our grief trapped inside. And we are diminished by that.

Lament is what Jesus did when he looked out over Jerusalem and realized the capital of his homeland was not the city he hoped it would be, that it was not a place of peace, a place that welcomed the truth and paid heed to the prophets, a city that approximated the reign of God, but that it was, instead, a place of violence that rejected the truth and killed the prophets.

But that was just the beginning for him. Just a few weeks later he would offer perhaps the most poignant lament in history, when he found himself alone and dying on a cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, a prayer, which I would guess, most of us have whispered at some point in our lives.

Lament is what the people of my hometown did the day after the dam broke, and the flood waters finally receded.

Lament is what the people of New Zealand are doing today, and indeed, what people of good conscience and good faith and loving hearts are doing the world over in solidarity with them, following the terrible shootings in two mosques, ironically in the city of Christchurch.

So today, on this one Sunday of Lent, we are going to join them. We're going to continue the practice we began last week. We're going to share in a visual mediation, in the hope, perhaps, of letting the ball out of the box.

So let me invite you to focus your attention on the image on the cover of the bulletin. (See the image of the angel above.)

Imagine that you are that angel. It's just you, alone, in your own private space.

Where is that tear coming from? What happened to cause it? Let that memory come into focus.

(take some time to do this)

As you reflect on that experience, how do you feel right now?

(let yourself feel whatever it is you're feeling)

How big is that ball?

(pause, consider its size)

What it be like to open that box, and let it go . . .