

“Good Grief”

Sermon based on Luke 2:29-35, John 19:23-27, 1 Cor. 7:29-31

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The Jews have a ritual called *Yahrzeit*. This is a Yiddish word that means “anniversary,” and it refers to the one-year anniversary of someone’s death. On the *Yahrzeit*, a Jew who has been in grief marks the official end of the period of mourning by saying a special prayer for mourners. Although nobody can put a precise date on when someone’s grief over the death of a loved one should be over, I think there is great wisdom in this Jewish custom because it reminds us of two important truths: first, grief is real and there has to be sufficient time given to the process of mourning the death of someone we have loved and lost; second, life does go on and thus even mourning must eventually give way to a new focus on the life of the living. Today is the *Yahrzeit* of Darrell Lightner, who died one year ago today, and our sister Lynne has been in mourning this past year for her beloved husband. So I think it is appropriate to mark this occasion with her and to take this commemoration of Darrell’s *Yahrzeit* to reflect on the reality of grief that we all inevitably have to face so we can ask what consolation and hope our Christian faith has to offer us in the midst of grief and loss.

Specifically, I want to ask: Is there such a thing as “good grief” and if so, what does it look like? No doubt, you all remember the *Peanuts* cartoon. Every time Lucy would get exasperated with Charlie Brown, she’d let out her frustration with him by exclaiming: “Good grief, Charlie Brown!” But all joking aside, what if we can affirm that the process of grieving, when done well, holds redemptive possibilities for our lives beyond the intense sadness of our

loss? What if there really is such a thing as good grief? A colleague of mine who teaches pastoral care at a seminary wrote a book recently entitled *Good Mourning*, spelled “M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G.” He’s asking the same question: is it possible to mourn well so that, beyond the sadness of our losses, we experience a new quality of life that enriches us and makes us stronger persons?

While I believe very much that this is the case, that there is such a thing as good grief or good mourning, I hesitate to talk about it out of fear that I might be misunderstood as minimizing or trivializing the nature of grief itself. The last thing that any of us wants to do when someone else is grieving is to trivialize it. Grief is surely one of the most agonizing experiences a person can ever undergo. Nothing is more painful, I think, than the grief that comes with loss. And loss can be of many kinds, not only loss through death, but also loss of a marriage through divorce, loss of a job or a career, loss of health, loss of youth, loss of a cherished dream we have had for our lives that we now realize will never come true. But loss on account of death seems to focus the nature of grief so sharply that we can use this as our example to talk about grief in general.

Grief is a major theme in the Bible. You may remember that Martin Luther, in his Christmas sermon that I read for you, emphasized the close connection between the manner of Jesus’ birth and the manner of his death. Being born in a humble stable, the messiah, the king of kings, also died a humiliating death on a cross. There is a hint pointing in this direction in what Simeon said to Mary when she and Joseph brought their baby Jesus into the temple: “and a sword will pierce your own soul, also” (Luke 2:35). A sword will pierce Mary’s soul. This is a reference to the suffering Mary will face when Jesus dies. The great joy Mary had as a young mother, beaming with pride as she showed off her newborn baby to everyone around her, will

someday be overshadowed by the agonizing grief of watching her grown-up son tortured to death by Roman soldiers. In John's gospel we read: "When the Romans crucified Jesus...standing by the cross was his mother" (John 19:23, 25). Imagine her anguish at seeing her own child treated this way by others. Imagine watching the baby to whom you gave birth now having to die! How did Mary ever recover from such overwhelming grief? How did she go forward with her life?

We know that Jesus himself was in deep grief when his friend Lazarus died. The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35. It consists of only two words: "Jesus wept." "Weeping" is a much stronger word than "crying." It suggests deep grief and anguish. Jesus was no stranger to grief. Christians have always found in Isaiah's description of the suffering servant of God an apt characterization of who Jesus was: "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

The Bible is filled with many other examples of people in grief. Job is a classic story of someone whose grief was so great that he simply wanted to die himself and be done with life altogether (Job 10:18). Indeed, there is an entire book of the Bible called *Lamentations*, that is, songs of lament, sorrow, grief, and mourning. The Bible is not unrealistic about the grief and sorrow we endure in this life.

Grief is one of the most difficult things to experience for oneself. The words of Jesus on the cross have often come to mind whenever I have been struck down by grief: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). I'm sure we've all had experiences that make it possible for us to resonate with these words. Grief can be so painful and all-consuming that it sometimes feels as if we have been utterly abandoned by God. The loss hurts so much that we just want the pain to go away. C. S. Lewis wrote a book about his own experience of losing his

wife. With relentless honesty, he observed of himself: “Aren't all these notes [just] the senseless writings of a man who won't accept the fact that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?” There is great wisdom in what Lewis says: “there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it.” Yet, who among us wants to hear words like this when we are in the throes of grief? Who among us wants to hear that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it? But Lewis is right. Although we would do almost anything to numb ourselves to the agonizing pain caused by grief, the hard truth is that we just have to suffer it, to feel the pain, to give in to it and go through it, before it lifts.

But it does lift, eventually, though never as quickly as we would like. I once told you about two boys in my church's youth group who were killed in a car accident when we were 15 years old. A few years ago, I had a conversation with the mother of one of these boys about her grief over her son's death. Her name is Marilyn. She told me about what it was like to lose her only son; her grief was all-consuming and it was as if her world had come to an end. Then she said, “But one morning I woke up and I realized that I just didn't have any tears left.” Grief had run its course, and she was now ready to move on. Looking back on that tragic event in her life that happened 48 years ago, Marilyn also observed: “Since then I have lived a completely different life than I ever could have imagined before the accident happened.” It's as though she were saying to me: “I had to die to my old life and before I could rise again to a new life.”

Sometimes grief makes people bitter, and they seethe with resentment at their misfortune. Sometimes they turn to alcohol or other drugs and addictions to numb their pain. Unfortunately, however, such people never get out of their grief because they have been too afraid to face it and

suffer it head-on. Instead, they've done everything they could to suppress or avoid grieving their loss. So, they remain stuck in their grief. This is not "good grief." This is not "good mourning."

This didn't happen in Marilyn's case. If anything, her loss made her more open to the sufferings of others, more ready to be there for others going through their own grief. In my home church, there have been two other losses of young people I grew up with since that time; even though these two were both grown men in their twenties, not teen-agers, nevertheless they were survived by their parents. On both occasions, Marilyn was one of the first to be there for them, whether waiting in the Intensive Care Unit with these parents who were hoping against hope that their son might not die or being with them shortly after the news of their son's death arrived. Talking about parents who have to bury their own children, Marilyn said to me with a knowing but sad smile on her face: "It's a very small club." She chose to be there for others in their grief because she had been through it herself and knew at first hand just how excruciating their grief was as few others would be able to understand who hadn't lost a child themselves. As she said, "It's a very small club." But she knew that, henceforth, she'd always be a member of that club and so she did her part to help others who involuntarily became members of that club as well.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who was sent to a Nazi concentration camp. While he was there, he made an important observation about the differences between people and how they responded to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Everybody had a reason to grieve; after all, they had lost virtually everything except life itself: jobs, houses, property, even their dignity. In this situation, Frankl observed that the one freedom these

prisoners still had left was the freedom to decide how to face their losses, how to suffer, how to grieve. Some lost their faith in God altogether; others, however, grew in their faith, as Marilyn did after her son died. After the accident, Marilyn became more involved in the life of the church than ever before. She herself would say that her faith is now stronger, not weaker, as a result of what she had to suffer. But that was her choice. She chose the path of “good grief.”

But what do we say to those who are in grief? What words are there to console them? The prophet Isaiah says, “The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word those who are weary” (Isa. 50:4). How to sustain with a word those who are weary with grief! That’s the question! But not even the best course in pastoral care at seminary can give you the right words to say in every situation. Still, we do know what *not* to say. Having gone through intense grief many times myself, I am acutely sensitive to the fact that when others are going through grief, the last thing you ever want to say to them is, “Aren’t you over it yet? C’mon, get over it.” This is to trivialize the suffering and grief of others. Who are we to tell them that they should be over it by now? I’m sure Marilyn never said anything like this to a parent who has lost a child. But what can we say to those in grief that can actually be a comfort to them in their suffering? It’s not an easy question to answer, because there are no simple formulas, no magic words that can take away another’s grief.

I think that, in these situations, words matter far less than just being there with someone and letting them know that they are not all alone in their agonizing grief. We don’t have to find the right words; we just have to show them that we care. By our presence we give others a safe space in which to grieve. We let them know that they are not alone in this deep sorrow. That’s

what the apostle Paul means when he says that as Christians, we “weep with those who weep, we mourn with those who mourn, we grieve with those who grieve” (Rom. 12:15). One of the purposes of the church is that we are members of a community where each shares the sorrows of the others. So, by being here for one another as we suffer grief, no one has to suffer alone. Grief shared is what takes the loneliness out of grieving. We can be sad, but we don’t have to feel isolated and cut off from others. In truth, this is one of the most important things we can do for one another, namely, to suffer *with* the other in her or his grief. That’s actually what the word “compassion” means: to suffer *with* another. Grief is healed when we not only allow ourselves to suffer it fully, as Lewis realized, but also when we let others suffer it with us. Good grief is grief that is shared with others who care about us and so feel compassion for us.

When Jesus wept upon hearing that his friend Lazarus had died, he was weeping not only for himself but also for his friends Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. He felt their grief, too; that’s what compassion is: feeling the suffering of others. When I worked at a funeral home, I would sometimes find myself getting choked up and my eyes would get moist because I could literally feel the grief of those around me, even though I myself wasn’t grieving the loss of the person they were grieving since I had never known that person. With Jesus as our model of what it means to be genuinely human, we have a model of “good grief,” both for ourselves when we are in grief and also for when we are called to suffer with others in compassion. As Christians, we have a fellowship of others with whom to share our grief and whose grief we are also willing to share. None of us has to suffer alone with our grief

Not only did Jesus feel this kind of compassion for the suffering of others. As Christians, we also believe that even God suffers with us in our grief. The New Testament affirms that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). But what is love if not being affected by the suffering of others? Love is what makes the suffering of grief both possible and necessary. Since God is love, we know that God is compassionate, that God feels our pain, our grief, our sorrow with us. We know, therefore, that we can take our grief to God in prayer, because God feels it with us. That’s why our hymn for prayer contains these lines: “What a privilege to carry, all our griefs to God in prayer.” Since we have a God who grieves and suffers with us, we are never alone.

When we love someone, we open ourselves up to the experience of pain and sorrow. The extent of our capacity to love corresponds with the extent of our capacity to suffer. There is no love without suffering! That’s a lesson that most of us would not like to learn, but it’s true, oh so true. In fact, we grieve because someone we loved has been lost to us. But if we can learn to grieve well, we find that, when the sadness lifts, not only does life go on but also our hearts have been expanded, enlarged, because we have acquired new capacities to suffer and to be compassionate through our love; moreover, we discover that the suffering of grief doesn’t kill us, as we had feared; rather, we emerge from our grief new people, as it were, capable of being instruments of God’s love to a world of broken-hearted people, much like Marilyn emerged from her grief with a new lease on life and a new purpose in living.

The promise of good grief is that there are redemptive possibilities for us on the other side of grieving. The sadness of our loss becomes a permanent part of us but the sadness no longer cripples us. We find, as Lewis did, that the only thing we can do with suffering is to

suffer it; but that once suffered and mourned well, new possibilities for our lives open up for us if we are willing to embrace them.

This idea that there is such a thing as good grief must sound very strange to the many people in our society who fear suffering more than anything else; but it does explain two otherwise puzzling verses in the New Testament. The first is from the apostle Paul when he says: “Let those of you who mourn live as though you were not mourning” (1 Cor. 7:30). In other words: Those who are mourning should not despair because your grief will come to an end and new possibilities for your life will be given to you from God. Even in the midst of grief, we have to remember that there is more to who we are than our grief. The second verse is from the Beatitudes where Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). In the spirit of Jesus, we could add to his words: not only shall those who mourn be comforted but also those who mourn shall provide comfort to others. For only those who mourn well can provide the genuine comfort that others need when they are in grief. Amen.

The Mourner’s Prayer: O God of all comfort and consolation: We praise you for the gift of life, and for those dear companions in our lives whom we love and whose death we mourn. We praise you that you keep our loved ones forever safe in your loving arms and we know that death can never truly separate us from them. Keep us ever hopeful, O God, knowing that you are stronger than death; and let us not lose faith, since in you is eternal life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.