

Through the Valley of Grief
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Psalm 23; John 11:11-43; Proverbs 3:5-6
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A little over four years ago I was appointed as your Associate Pastor here at Tipp City United Methodist Church on January 1, 2006. Pastor Jeff, who was the lead pastor at that time, informed me that I would be preaching my first sermon on January 8.

He gave me a lot of time to get broke in didn't he??

Basically he wanted me to tell you what was going on in my life at that time, how I came to be in the ministry and what God meant to me.

So this is how part of that sermon went:

6 months ago my nephew was killed in a car wreck – he broke every bone in his body in the wreck.

2 weeks later my dear friend, Connie, who was also the choir director at the church I had come from, was killed in a car wreck.

She left behind her beloved husband, and 3 small children.

2 weeks later my mom was diagnosed with cancer for the second time in her life.

2 weeks after that Kevin's step mom was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time.

2 weeks after that I had a hysterectomy because Kevin and I had recently lost the only child we had ever been pregnant with together after 10 years of trying.

2 weeks later Kevin began a new job.

And 4 weeks after that I interviewed for my job here at the Tipp Church and began it on January 1.

5 months later my mother would go home to be with my nephew having won her victory over cancer. Not quite the victory we were all counting on but a victory nevertheless.

My baby, our youngest son would graduate the same day we buried my mom.

I say all of that to let you know that I get grief; my family gets grief.

I have walked through that valley of the shadow many times.

I won't begin to tell you that I understand grief or that I have all the answers but I get grief as I know many of you do too.

At a funeral I did this past week, one woman shared these words as she spoke about her mother: [Grief is the price we pay for love.](#)

Today as we continue our series on Through it All - we are looking at the Valley of Grief.

Grief is typically treated as something to be "gotten over with" as soon as possible.

Sometimes certain things are not even seen as worthy of grief.

If others were not impacted the same way as you then you have the problem.

There doesn't seem to be any room for people responding differently when it comes to grief.

Our culture trivializes tragedy and loss.

We watch all the devastation on the evening news and are just given the facts, but no opportunity to grieve.

Children dying of starvation, masses killed by an earthquake or Tsunami SHOULD break our hearts. I am sure it breaks God's heart.

We should pause to grieve such tragedies.

The bible never tells us not to grieve instead what it says is:

“Grieve not as those who have no hope.”

My hope for you today is that you will see beyond grief to hope.

So - WHAT IS GRIEF?

"The Handbook of Psychiatry" in 1974, defined grief as "...the normal response to the loss of a loved one by death."

In 1984, Dr. Terese Rando---a noted grief specialist, researcher and author---defined grief as "... the process of psychological, social and somatic reactions to the perception of loss".

In 1991, the Grief Resource Foundation of Dallas, Texas found that, for them, a good working and practical definition of Grief was "the total response of the organism to the process of change".

Although grieving the death of someone dear to us may be the most universal and most intense grief, it is not the only cause of grief.

So what is grief and what produces it?

A helpful equation I found, which proves itself daily in all instances is:

Change = Loss = Grief. (TLC Group, Dallas).

Basically, grief is about coming to terms with the fact that things will never be the same again.

Something is lost and is never coming back again.

It may be something more obvious or tragic like the death of a family member or friend, divorce, disability, rape.

Or it may be the more "natural" loss of health, youth, beauty, having kids in the house, loss of job, retirement from work or a position or a sport, moving, last child out of infant stage, toddler stage, teenage stage, loss of status.

The intensity of the grief depends on how the loss is perceived.

If the loss is not perceived as significant, the grief reaction will be minimal or barely felt.

If the grief is perceived as significant, the reaction can be significant as well.

So - What do we do with our grief?

In John 11 we find Jesus himself weeping over the death of a friend.

Chapter 11 is the story of a family who is grieving over the loss of their brother Lazarus, who has died.

His sisters Mary and Martha are weeping with many friends when Jesus finally arrives. Perhaps you remember the story, it is the one where Jesus will eventually raise Lazarus from the dead.

And yet before that happens we find Jesus weeping.

Why?

After all, Jesus knew that he would raise Lazarus within minutes?

Author Tim Keller answers this way:

"The answer is because He is perfect. He is perfect love. That's perfect love. He will not close His heart even for ten minutes. He will not refuse to enter in."

So what do we do with our grief?

First - GRIEF needs to be entered into not avoided.

We need to accept the reality of the loss and the pain that it brings

-to actually cry, weep, express our pain, disappointment, regret.

David writes after King Saul of Israel and his son, Jonathan, are killed in battle a moving, beautiful and detailed lament of the event in 2 Samuel.

Part of what he writes says: "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights. How the mighty have fallen.... Saul and Jonathan, in life they were loved and gracious.... O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul."

"How the might warriors have fallen." David, consumed with grief, addresses Jonathan directly, "I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother."

His lament will take 8 verses to express.

He pours out his grief with tears about the enormous loss Israel now faces.

David recognizes that something precious in Israel is gone and will never return.

David ordered that this song of lament be taught to all the men of Judah.

He wanted them to learn it, memorize it and sing it, as their experience, not simply his.

Why did David force the people to stop and pay attention? Why did he want them to express sorrow over the death of Saul and Jonathan?

Peter Scazzero who pastors a church in Queens, New York says:

"David understood how indispensable grieving is to spiritual maturity. David knew we are deepened by taking the time to grieve our losses before moving on. He knew how important it was for the people to stay connected to reality and not run from their pain."

To enter into your grief and not avoid it for some of you might mean going way back or deep down and uncovering the pain you buried a long time ago but never dealt with -- divorce of parents, molestation, loss of innocence, the loss of childhood itself.

Whatever it is, together you and God can enter into it.

Secondly - Pour out your heart to God.

A Christian doesn't just EXPRESS their grief but they DIRECT it.

Prayer enables us to process our grief in God's presence.

I assure you that God approves of your tears.

Look at the Psalms (half are laments or songs of mourning),
then there is Lamentations, Job, Jeremiah.

Listen to just some of their words as they pour out their heart to God:

3 My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" 4 These things I remember as I pour out my soul ... 9 I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" (Ps.42)

1 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. 2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted. 3 I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. (Ps.77)

The comfort for the Christian is that Someone is listening. Someone sees our tears. Someone sympathizes. We are not alone in our grief.

Psalm 147:3, TLB. "[God] heals the brokenhearted, binding up their wounds."
The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them ... The Lord is close to the brokenhearted (Ps.34:17-18)

When you come to Jesus you come to the one who is the "man of sorrows, and he who is familiar with suffering". (Is.53)

The Psalms are a great practical tool you can use to help get you started on pouring out your heart to God. (Ps. 13, 22, 38, 42, 55, 59, 61, 77)

Next - Focus on the HOPE of Christ in the midst of your grieving.

What is that hope?

Jesus told Martha at the graveside of her brother Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

Death itself will die and its affects will be reversed.

What happened to Lazarus in Jesus raising him from the grave is but a foreshadow of a greater resurrection.

One day God is going to fix everything that was broken and restore everything that was lost.

Revelations assures us of that with these words:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

The Bible offers us the good news of the God who weeps with us, who weeps over us, and who will one day wipe our tears away once and for all.

There will be no more sorrow, no death, separation, disappointment, sin, regret, pain.

All we will know throughout eternity is love, righteousness, dignity, wholeness, life, peace, satisfaction, glory.

Heaven is the place where there will be no loss, and things will only change "from glory to glory."

In the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve decided to eat from the forbidden tree, to sin, grief entered into the world.

And it was in a Garden when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene after he had been resurrected that hope was born anew.

And Finally - Allow the old to birth the new.

When my nephew was killed, one of the people we spoke with said that in time we would find a new normal.

For the old normal was forever gone.

John Milton in his poem *Paradise Lost* describes the evil of history as a compost pile--a mixture of decaying substances such as animal excrement, vegetable and fruit peels, potato skins, egg shells and dead leaves. If you cover it with dirt, after a few years it smells wonderful. The soil has become a rich, natural fertilizer and is tremendous for growing fruit and vegetables. But you have to be willing to wait five to ten years! Milton's point is that the worst events of human history that we cannot understand, even hell itself, are only compost in God's wonderful eternal plan.

Out of the greatest evil, the death of Jesus, came the greatest good, our salvation and eternal life.

God transforms evils into good without diminishing the awfulness of the evil.

In that first sermon, I preached to you I went on to tell you that I had suffered great abuse in my life.

However, what God revealed to me in time was that he had kept the best part of me safe and secure even in the midst of the abuse, he had loved me always, and he had never left me.

And when I had cried my tears, God had cried with me.

All that grief and pain eventually led me into the arms of hope and into the ministry to share my hope in Jesus Christ with others.

The old gave birth to the new in ways I would have never dreamed or imagined.

So - WHY is GRIEF important?

Where we want to get the pain of grief over with as soon as possible, God is seeking to use our losses and the grief of them to enlarge us and mature us.

"[Embracing grief] is THE only pathway to becoming a compassionate person like our Lord Jesus." -- Pete Scazzero

Author Gerald Sittser who lost his wife, daughter and mother in a car accident, concluded this about grief, and I have to agree with him:

"(Grief) will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. There is no going back to the past ... It is not therefore true that we become less through loss -- unless we allow the loss to make us less, grinding our soul down until there is nothing left. Loss can also make us more. I did not get over my loved ones; rather I absorbed the loss into my life until it became part of who I am. Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul and enlarged it ... One learns the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul ... However painful, sorrow is good for the soul ... The soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering."
(Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*)

As I journeyed through my own valley of grief I discovered that I couldn't understand why, I couldn't figure out the answers, I couldn't make sense of it all.

And then God gave me these verses from Proverbs 3 that have become a part of my soul and who I am today as the old birthed the new.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight."

God showed me that I didn't have to understand, in fact I will never understand or make sense of it all.

God helped me to see that I didn't need to understand, I only needed to trust and obey.

As I entered into the grief, cried out to God and placed my hope in Christ, slowly the old gave way to the new.

I continue to grieve in some ways and probably always will but

As Sittser has said the loss has become a part of who I am.

I have found that as we absorb our own pain and grief, we receive amazing blessings also.

We learn to forgive more.

We have a greater concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized, the wounded.

We understand them.

We are less covetous, less idolatrous.

Life is stripped of its pretense and non-essentials.

We are more apt to rid ourselves of the unimportant things in life others so desperately want--power, control, money, or approval.

God really is at the center of our lives, not superficial, trivial pursuits.

There is an enhanced sense of living in the immediate present, rather than postponing life until some future point in time.

Today is important and tomorrow may never be.

We more easily rearrange life's priorities to be with our spouse, family and friends.

I understand that I am an alien and sojourner here on earth, and that

Heaven is my real home and something I long for on a whole new level.

I know that although I may walk through the valley of Grief, I do not walk it alone and I will not stay in it but I will go through.

Pray with me

Loving and compassionate Father, Abba,

We look to you who holds time and eternity in your hands, to you who knows the answers to things that we are barely able to shape into questions, to you who can heal the pain that now claws at our hearts.

And we know that we can't live like this. So we come to you broken, alone and so sad we can barely stand to breathe. We don't know where to turn; we don't know how to start. So we come to You. We give you our aching hearts. WE give you our tears and all our fears. Fill us with your love and give us hope. AMEN