

Grieving with Hope

sermon digest

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John 11:23-37; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Lutheran pastor and hospital chaplain Grainger Westberg was a pioneer in developing the concept of “wholistic” medicine, bringing together the healing qualities of religion with medicine to treat the “whole” patient. His work gained the respect of physicians, and he became the first minister appointed to the faculty of the University of Chicago School of Medicine. His unique faculty position provided occasional preaching duties at the University Rockefeller Chapel. The Sunday service was broadcast on Chicago WGN radio, and a typical Sunday sermon resulted in ten to twenty-five letters from folks asking for copies of the sermon or commenting on the service. One Sunday, Westberg delivered the sermon on the subject of grief; the next week he was overwhelmed with more than a thousand letters. Laughing at himself, Westberg at first thought that he had suddenly become a great preacher. After his next sermon resulted in the usual dozen comments, he realized that he had touched a sensitive point of human need. He expanded his sermon on grief into a small book *Good Grief* that over the next forty years sold more than two million copies and became a standard of pastoral ministry.

Westberg anchored his thought in the two biblical texts that we have read today. He commented that the weeping of Jesus “describe a man who, when grief came, was able to weep, for He wanted and needed to express the feelings within him.” He then took issue with folks who distort Paul’s counsel to a stoic command, “grieve not!” He suggested that we read the complete phrase and add an appropriate comma: “Grieve, not as those who have no hope”; and he added, “but for goodness’ sake, grieve when you have something worth grieving about!”

Facing loss is spiritually and emotionally healthier than denial. If you are a fan of the Peanuts cartoon, you are familiar with Charlie Brown’s favorite expression, “Good grief!” Charlie Brown’s head is down and Lucy is listening as he exclaims, “Another ball game lost!! Good grief!” Lucy offers consolation, “Look at it this way Charlie Brown. . .we learn more from losing than we do from winning.” The last frame shows Charlie Brown blowing Lucy over with his shouted response: “That makes me the smartest person in the world!”

Most of us grow up on the advice, “pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again.” Even if Charlie Brown never prevails, he also never gives up. Every fall finds Charlie Brown trying to kick the football with Lucy holding, and every year she pulls the ball away at the very last moment to send Charlie up in the air with another missed kick. Charlie Brown may be a slow learner, but he certainly is no quitter. His strength is his honesty. More people identify with Charlie Brown’s consistent losing than they do with the fantastic powers of the cartoon super-hero. I realize that a lost ball game is not exactly the same as an amputated limb, a job termination, or a death in the family. Contrary to public opinion, learning how to deal with loss is a necessary part of growing up; and the relatively minor experiences of loss help to prepare us for the devastating experiences of life that eventually come to everyone.

Shortly after moving to Oak Ridge, we were hit with several deaths in the church family, so I offered a pastoral group on grief. One lady asked to be a part of the group, although, she explained, she had not experienced a recent death. She wisely noted that she and her husband were getting on in years and growing closer to the end of life. She also had a long history of clinical depression. She wanted to learn how to deal with loss. I complimented her foresight and wisdom. Then she asked my response to a pamphlet that she had received from TV evangelist Kenneth Copeland, “Exposing the Deadly Nature of Grief.” I would not have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes. Copeland characterized sorrow at the death of a loved one as the work of the devil and a lack of faith in God. He promoted a stoic rejection of any sorrow or expression of grief in the face of death illustrated by his own example in the death of his mother. As I viewed Copeland’s pamphlet, I realized that I was swimming against the stream of culture Christianity.

In “Death as the Teacher of Wisdom” in the *Christian Century* (Feb 26, 1986), Marcus Borg observed, “contemporary mainstream American culture is deeply death-denying.” Often the family and the medical staff of a dying person will not openly acknowledge the reality that life is coming to an end. Our language is filled with euphemisms to avoid the word, “death.” Borg reported on a university course on death in which he sent his students out to attend and write a review of a funeral. Borg discovered from his

students that the majority of Christian funerals do not deal directly or honestly with death. Borg further noted the same kind of discomfort with death as with the language of human sexuality and cited the preoccupation with video violence in TV and movies as "the pornography of death." Borg concluded that biblical honesty requires us to face the reality of our own mortality and to learn from it.

Clarence Jordan reflected on the beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn" and noted that real mourners are moved by their grief to do something about the injustice in this world. He observed that mourning elicits a courageous, hopeful engagement and warned his audience to look out for someone who begins to mourn to the point of a certain gleam in the eye and set in the jaw; tremendous power and encouragement grows out of grief.

We live within the bounds of a limited supply of life. In Luke 15, Jesus offers three stories of human loss and called attention to the normal grief over a lost coin or a lost sheep in order to get to the point. What about a lost son? Should a parent not grieve over a lost child even if the brother is too angry for compassion? If we were able to follow the fantasies of the entertainment media and just start all over again every time someone dies, we would have neither reason nor need to grieve about death. But the value of life is measured by its limitation, and even Jesus recognized the deep pain of separation from one he loved.

Post-Easter grief affirms the Christian hope. The common ground between the Fourth Gospel story of Lazarus and the counsel of Paul in I Thessalonians is the continuing experience of death after Easter. The apocalyptic finale often cited in funerals: "God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. (Revelation 21:3-4)" often ignores the simple truth that we are not there yet. Thessalonian Christians were walking the boundary of despair. Christians expected the immediate return of Christ within a generation of the crucifixion. Easter was the beginning of the end—the end of suffering and death in the Kingdom of God. Like many other Christians of the day, these folks found that life went on as usual. Birth, death, and taxes were the revolving door of their time as in every preceding and subsequent age. I am not sure whether the Thessalonians were more depressed than others or more open about what bothered them. Someone had to violate the law of silence to speak of the unspeakable. Somehow Paul knew to address the problem of death in the process of the Christian life. As he affirmed the Christian hope, he also acknowledged the grief of the death of the saints in the family of faith.

The early Christian affirmation of the resurrection did not eclipse sorrow over the death of Jesus. Jesus' statement, "I am the resurrection and the life" did not take away his sense of grief at the tomb of Lazarus. His grief was anything but an expression of despair. Jesus grieved separation from Lazarus just as the early church grieved their separation from the physical presence of their Lord. In fact, the church had nothing to hope if immortality was the natural condition of life. The Gnostic denial of the reality of death for Jesus offers no more hope today than it did then. The Stoic call to control emotion and to denounce the pain of grief is just as cold and unreal today as it was then. Just as the Psalmist trusted the Shepherd who leads through the valley of the shadow of death, Christians were learning to trust the God who raised the crucified Christ. Good Friday comes before Easter Sunday, the cross comes before the resurrection, and death comes before the Christian hope.

When we stand at the boundary of life and death, we stand on holy ground. Of all the times in our lives when we need to hear the word of the gospel of Christ and to gather our spirits in prayer before the eternal God, this is the time. Perhaps more than any other moment, this is the point where God has given us a word to proclaim. This is where we take off the shoes from our feet, when we lay aside all of the mundane cares and concerns of daily life to lift our eyes to the eternal. Here is the teachable moment when we are willing to hear the Word from the crucified with a new urgency.

Death brings a deep sense of personal loss; but for the people who are in Christ, death can never be the place of despair. Remember that Easter dawned over an empty tomb; the grave is the place where we finally come to celebrate hope. Here we proclaim that the dead in Christ are not left behind, they have gone before us. They are the leaders; we are the followers. Here we proclaim that we move toward victory over death and a new community in Christ. We are "caught up together to meet the Lord." Here we have been given the Word to encourage one another. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."