

Good Grief

John 11:17-36

(Memorial Sunday – May 25, 2008)

Franklin Pierce seemed to have a lot of promise. He was bright, a Bowdoin College graduate. He was a gifted speaker. He had a commanding presence. He was pious, charming, and honest. Everyone predicted Franklin Pierce would make a great fourteenth President of the United States. Few presidents, however, have failed more dismally than Pierce.

To a large extent his failure was the result of unresolved grief. All of the Pierce's three children died young – not that unusual in the early 1800's. But their last child, Benny, died in a particularly tragic manner. Just two months before Pierce's inauguration, Benny was killed in a minor train accident.

Franklin and Jane Pierce were devastated by their loss. When they arrived in Washington a few weeks later, they asked that the traditional inauguration festivities not be held. Jane Pierce dressed only in black for the next four years. For two years she didn't leave the White House's upper rooms, her state functions being fulfilled by an aunt. Franklin, uncharacteristically, began to drink heavily. His presidency suffered.

He became the first president in American history who wanted a second term who wasn't nominated by his party for a second term. Franklin and Jane Pierce returned to Concord, New Hampshire. They attended worship every week. They held family prayers every day. Still, their grief overwhelmed them. Franklin Pierce ended up a political and social outcast, even in New Hampshire. Grief destroyed the presidency of Franklin Pierce.

What is grief?

"Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone." Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person."

"Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone for a few minutes before going about the task of the day."

"Grief is the silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes 100 times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there."

"Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with one another for many years."

"Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died."

"Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they (can't be)."

“Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life . . . and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.” That’s a quote from Edgar Jackson, a noted expert on grief.

Grief is my general topic this morning. Grief most often comes after the death of a loved one. But it can come in many other ways, too. People can grieve the breakup of their marriage. College students can experience grief on moving away from home. We can grieve over a change in our job or over a decline in our ability or our health. All life involves loss, starting with birth, when we lose that special, biological bond we had with our mother. We lose, and grieve, and start again, our whole lives long. Whichever of the many points in life where a period of mourning is required of us, if there is to be real healing, one must begin by recognizing that the grief is profoundly legitimate and necessary. There are no real shortcuts (including religious ones).

But I’m convinced that there are more helpful and less helpful ways of grieving. What I would want for you, and for myself, is an experience of grief that is “good.” That’s not an experience of grief that is painless, effortless, or easy. Grief, by its very nature, is often discomforting, distressing, and hard. But rather, an experience of grief that does no permanent damage; that allows us to affirm life again without lasting emotional scars. “Good grief,” that’s what I’d like to talk about today. First, I’d like to look at the theology around grief.

It is not true, for example, that if you believe that sorrows, losses and tragedies are really wonderful God-sent blessings in disguise, then you won’t have to grieve so much. That is religious quackery! It’s true, some unhappy episodes of our lives are transmuted into blessings. Nevertheless, some of them are just plain, raw tragedies that come with our being human beings in a physical world where events are frighteningly free; free to take place in ways that are gloriously good but also free to be outrageously bad. One can drive himself crazy with religious speculations on how this awful thing might be one of God’s very clever ideas. No. The God of Jesus Christ is to be seen as suffering WITH you, working from WITHIN you to bring you back to life. The God who is some sort of celestial puppeteer doing behind-the-scenes manipulations and experimentations to test us or force improvements on us (if we survive), isn’t the God of the Christian faith. In fact, that’s a frightening God!

Believe it or not, whatever the loss, the desolation or the brokenheartedness, those times are just as filled with possibilities for yours and my renewal and re-creation as are the happy and successful episodes. Again, GOD DOES NOT INFLICT THEM UPON US for that reason, but God nevertheless is poised, waiting, anxious to be involved in the recovery, the rebirth,

the new person that comes out at the other end of those dark valleys. As is more than obvious in the Christian Gospel, a major part of God's "job description" is working with us and through us to carve new life out of tragedy, to unfold wisdom out of error, to bring meaning out of chaos, and to bring life out of all kinds of death. It happens all the time! Personal deepenings, new appreciations, additional kinds of confidence, renewed faith, and much more come directly from that unpleasant journey through that shadowy valley for those who expect it and are determined to find it.

It is difficult to generalize about grief. Everyone's grief is different, just like everyone's fingerprints are different. Grief work isn't so much a continuous line – going from one thing to another -- as it is a spiral: going up a bit and sliding back – but hopefully, always, in the end, going up. Recovery from a profound loss comes in its own way and on its own schedule; that is, that it's anything but an orderly and predictable kind of healing.

Still, experts tell us that there are at least four important stages in grief. One important stage in "good grief" is recognition: acknowledging that the loss we feel is real and that it hurts.

Grief can be physically and emotionally painful. Grief can be a stress to our health. There could be a dry, cottony feeling in the throat and a tightness in the chest. Other people in grief have trouble sleeping. Widows and widowers are prone to becoming ill, especially within the first six months of their loss. There can be other physical effects.

On a psychological level, there may be confusion, numbness, unreality. Someone once wrote, "Grief is its own anesthesia." We may find it difficult to talk, reason, or remember.

When we lose a loved one, we may feel guilty. We may be plagued by the ways we have let them down -- or angry; with a doctor, a relative, the funeral director, the clergy, God, or the person who has died. Recognition of the power of these reactions of a first step in good grief.

A second step is release: allowing all those thoughts and hurt feelings to come out. A poet once wrote, "Grief is itself a medicine." Full expression of grief has a cleansing effect.

Tears are a good release of emotional tension. Washington Irving wrote, "There is a sacredness in tears. (Tears) are not the mask of weakness, but of power. (Tears) speak more eloquently than 10,000 tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love."

C. Charles Bachmann, a psychologist, calls tears "the best form of mental health insurance." He continues, "A general and genuine fear of the grief sufferer is that he will become mentally ill and suffer a nervous breakdown . . . if he gives way to grief. Precisely the opposite is true."

The Gospel of John tells us that when his friend, Lazarus, died, Jesus wept profusely. The Greek words we translate as “Jesus wept” indicate Jesus was shaken by huge sobs and wracked with pain as he considered his friend’s death and the pain of his two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Review is a third stage in “good grieving.” In the case of the death of a loved one, review means learning to live with our images and memories of the deceased. Paula D’Arcy quotes W. Graham Scroggie: “Let grief do its work. Tramp every inch of the sorrowful way. Drink every drop of the bitter cup. Draw from memory . . . ”seeing” the things our loved ones have left behind will give us daily pain – the clothes they wore, the letters they wrote, the books they read, the chairs in which they sat, the music they loved, the hymns they sang, the walks they took, the games they played, their seat in church, and much besides – but, what would we be without these reminders?”

Through reviewing memories, we learn to live with the mental image of our loved one, and learn to cherish it without being obsessed by it.

Retelling our story, sometimes, over and over, is another helpful way of reviewing our loss. Paula D’Arcy writes: “Bereaved people do not tell their stories in order to inform listeners; they repeat the facts in order to believe it themselves. When they speak, it is a form of therapy . . . The repetitions serve to break up the pain into smaller pieces, to make them manageable.” Review of memories and repetition of our story are a part of “good grief.”

A final stage in “good grieving” is return. Return to engagement with life; reaffirmation of the basic goodness of life, in spite of its loss and pain. A rabbi writes, “the melody that the loved one played upon the piano of your life will never be played quite that way again, but we must not close the keyboard and allow the instrument to gather dust. We must seek out other artists of the spirit, new friends who gradually will help us to find the road to life again, who will walk that road with us.”

There is business to attend to; there are decisions to be made, new patterns to establish, and new relationships to forge. Return can take a long time, sometimes years, but it can happen. When it happens, for short periods of time, we begin to notice that the clouds are a little less dark and the sun occasionally shines. Healing and reengagement with life begins again. As Madeline L’Engle has put it, “Grief doesn’t leave you. You leave grief.”

Recognition, release, review, and return are four stages in good grieving. They can be followed by anyone: Christian or non-Christian, atheist or believer. But our Christian faith has something additional, unique, wonderful to add: hope. Hope in God. Hope in that same power

that raised Christ from the grave is at work in our lives too, in the lives of those we love and have lost, for a time.

We who believe have the promise of Easter; a promise that death is not the end of life; that the separation we experience now will not last forever; that the death of our loved one is but a temporary loss; that a glorious reunion is ahead of us, in Christ; that there will come a time that those who mourn will receive their comfort, and all sorrows will be ended, and all tears will be wiped away.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. "Do you believe this," he asked Martha and Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe . . ."