

“Grieving with Hope”

November 12, 2017

#blessed series

It didn't escape me as I planned for this week that this message comes on the heels of multiple tragedies in our country and our world - and even in our state. News of violence and death seems like its not new at all, which makes all of it even more tragic.

Whether it's the violence in a Texas church last Sunday or domestic violence in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo where innocent lives were taken, the most vulnerable and innocent among us, it's unimaginable or horrifying. I'll confess that it makes my heart and soul weary and wondering what to do and how to respond.

First, I want to say that I do believe prayer is a powerful response and a way that we stand with those who have experienced tragedy we cannot imagine. Words aren't sufficient, and I don't have the answers to "why?" Any answer wouldn't be sufficient anyway, though I do believe that God does walk with us through the pain and grief.

Second, acting on our faith matters, and I know that may mean that we don't necessarily agree on what that looks like. What I will say for certain is that I truly believe that no one here wants violence to continue and innocent lives to be taken. I believe we agree on that point without question.

I pray that we seek God's wisdom as we respond and that we remember who we are and why we're here: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Our mission and ministry are as vital and as needed as ever. In the words of Rebekah Simon-Peter, we're called to "focus on what we're here to do: preach the Gospel (Good News), build the Kingdom of God here and now, help people grow spiritually, connect with our community and with God, give hope, share love, pray and practice the presence of Christ."

I also turn to Scripture - not because it relieves my questions - but because it reminds me that we're not the first ones to deal with tragedy. We're not the first ones to face difficult realities and seek to know how to respond. We're the first to confront the reality of death and wonder what to say and what to do.

Jesus faced the death of his friend, Lazarus, and he wept. He faced the violent death of John the Baptist, his cousin and the one who prepared the way for him, and he wanted to get away from the crowds - perhaps to spend some time in prayer offering his grief to God. In all of it, he didn't stop loving and serving others. And the same is true for us: in the midst of tragedy, we continue to love and serve God and others, and offer hope.

It seems trite to simply say that we can have hope in the midst of grief. Sometimes saying "have hope" is simply a platitude. But in a letter to the early church,

the apostle Paul really wanted those who were seeking to follow Jesus to cling to the hope that they had in him. For them, it wasn't a platitude. It was life-giving. It was much-needed encouragement.

It would seem that hope is in short supply for us these days. So I'm drawn to Paul's words, and I can claim them for myself: *Then you won't grieve over them and be like people who don't have any hope.* (SLIDE)

I even "tweeted" them with *#blessed*.

But the context is important here. I also have to be clear that grieving loss and having hope aren't polar opposites. I grieve because of the pain and the loss and everything that goes with it, but that doesn't mean I can't also hold onto hope. Even though death and grief are real, they are not the last word.

Paul wrote this letter early on - probably in the 50's AD - 20 years or so after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven. It's thought to be the earliest of all the New Testament letters. Paul and his audience were convinced that Jesus was coming - and coming anytime - soon!

Right after this in his letter, Paul says that the day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night." It's that way with most of the New Testament letters - the writer and the readers were counting on Jesus coming again within their lifetime - before their deaths.

So the real question for Paul and those he's writing to is this: what will happen to those who have already died before Jesus comes again? Does Jesus care about them? Those in the church in Thessalonica were largely Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus.

Paul had planted the church there, was run out of town, and then continued on his journey to share the Gospel, so they had some questions, particularly around death. Their traditions didn't claim the same promise of resurrection and eternal life, but their faith in Jesus did. Paul assures them that we share in the promise of Jesus' resurrection, and that is good news.

Last week, we affirmed our faith together giving thanks for the blessing of those who we name saints and claiming God's call on our lives as saints. But there was another part of that affirmation: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, **the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.***

Resurrection and eternal life is a part of our faith - not just a part that we pull out on Easter Sunday when we read that Scripture passage about Jesus' resurrection. Resurrection is central to the faith we claim and live. It doesn't mean that death and grief don't affect us, but it does mean that we don't stop there.

And I'll be honest - Paul's description here is both striking and confusing, but it's interesting to imagine: an audible command, an angel's call, a trumpet sound, the dead rising, and then those who are alive rising and meeting the Lord together in the air. It's high drama, and though I'm sure it brought comfort to those who first heard it, I don't dwell on it too much.

Our perspective is different. Though we're called to be ready for Christ to come again, we don't have the same sense of urgency. And yet, how might we claim a little more urgency as we live each day? How do we live our faith boldly - loving God and neighbor - and encouraging one another and offering hope? How do we live by the words "don't worry; be ready?"

This passage of Scripture has been used to scare people into faith, which doesn't work very well. This is largely where we get the idea of "rapture." Some have used this imagery to create a picture of people being left behind, but Paul is much more concerned with encouraging this community of believers and offering the amazing promise of resurrection. He's not trying to give timetables or timelines or scare them into believing because that doesn't make for true faith. He wants them to live in hope, not fear.

The people Paul writes to are living in the midst of tenuous times and are facing persecution and hardship. This new faith in Jesus isn't an easy thing to claim and proclaim, but he wants them to know that they can have peace. They can claim the power of resurrection for themselves and for those who have already died.

This week, I interviewed candidates for ministry as a part of the work of a board that I'm part of. One of the questions that we often ask or explore is about how we share the Good News of resurrection with those we encounter – not just knowing the theological "stuff," but knowing how to share hope with people in real situations – the practical side of theology.

In professional ministry, being present with families and offering hope in the midst of death is a part of what we do. The church still plays a vital role in offering hope to people in grief. Sometimes there's an opportunity to speak about God's grace working in people's lives. Sometimes there's a conversation with those who struggle with death. Sometimes there's a witness to share about how their loved one showed and shared God's grace - and how we can do the same with the time and life we have.

Maybe there's comfort in knowing that the people in Thessalonica wanted to know the same answers we do. What happens when we die? What about my loved one who passed away? Is she with God? Is he with God? I believe in heaven, but I really don't like going through the pain of death and grief.

And that's the truth: we all want to claim the promise of heaven, but the pain of death and grief is difficult. We fear death. And yes, I've heard it more times than I can

count from people of faith. I'm not afraid of death; I'm afraid of dying. And I can also tell you truly that there's a difference when people have a faith foundation. There's a sense of peace and assurance. It doesn't mean there's not sadness, but there's hope.

I've been a witness to it as a pastor. And many times, it reminds me of the promise of resurrection. I think about Lois who lost her husband suddenly early in their married life. She had three small children, but she told me that even in her grief, she clung to the hope of resurrection for him. She went on to marry again and blend her family with a wonderful spouse who died after battling dementia. She lost a son before she died. In all of it, her faith was clear - not absent of sadness and grief, but boldly shown in her trust in God's presence and God's promise for those who had died.

I thought of another family - children whose mother had died after a long life, but with many health struggles. Sometimes she hadn't been the easiest to get along with. But I remember when I gathered with her family and the joy of knowing that this woman's earthly struggles were over. The promise of new life with God was a blessing to them.

So does hope even in death set us apart - hope in the promise of resurrection and new life? Does hope in life set us apart - the willingness to see it among us even now - even when we face such tragedy and heart-brokenness? Will we have the courage that hope offers to live with faith and not fear - and to let faith, hope, and love dictate our attitudes and actions?

Friends, it doesn't mean that death is easy or that grief has no affect on us. Grief ministry is important and valuable in our life together and important to our community. We grieve deeply because we love deeply, and it changes us. But we also have hope to claim in the midst of it.

And the larger picture is our hope in God who makes all things new - that what we see now isn't the Kingdom. Violence, injustice, and struggle aren't God's desire for us. And yet, we know the joy and hope of those glimpses of the Kingdom where there is peace, justice, and reconciliation. We see how God's love breaks into our world and brings beauty and joy and love. Those glimpses give us hope for what is to come when God's reign and rule comes in its fullness.

So what does it mean to be #blessed? Can we live with resurrection hope - not ignoring the pain of losing those we love and the grief we feel, but carrying the promise of new life with us? Friends, grief is real, but hope is real, too.

How will we encourage one another? What message would you offer? How have you been blessed? Where do you find hope?

You can use your small piece of paper to share your word with others. May God help us to live as people of hope.