

“Compassionate Companions Needed”

November 11, 2018

Good Grief? series – Veterans Day

I consider myself very fortunate to have four lifelong friends. One I’ve known since elementary school, and the other three I met in middle school. We’ve stayed closely connected for 30 years. The joy of growing up together - engagements, weddings, children - along with the struggles, worries, and difficulties of growing older together - caring for and worrying about our parents and our kids - one friend whose mom died after a courageous battle with cancer, another living across the world, and all of us navigating the world and workplace as spouses and parents.

I think of my friends every time I read the Book of Job - not because I’ve experienced anything even close to what Job did, but because his friends teach us something really important. At first, they teach us how to be a friend to someone who is grieving, and for most of us, it’s a lesson we want and need desperately. It’s easy to overlook Job’s friends and his interactions with them. We skip right to Job’s struggle with God. *ven Peanuts tackled Job:*

SHOW SLIDE: Peanuts cartoon on Job and suffering

If we’re honest about grief and grieving, other people - family and friends - are a part of the process - hopefully for good, but sometimes not so good. Grief is both common and incredibly individual, but we need support on the journey. We need people around us to help in navigating the way.

We need compassionate companions, and we need to be compassionate companions. Consider those words - compassion literally “to suffer with.” Companion is actually connected to the idea of eating bread with someone - sharing a meal - sharing life together. It doesn’t mean that we stay in grief or that it lasts forever. We’ve already said that grief is a journey. *eing a compassionate companion means that we try to live in their shoes and care.*

At first, Job’s friends do the right thing. Right after Job loses his family and all that he has, Job’s three friends - Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar -leave their homes, meet up together somewhere, and make their way to where Job is. Their plan is to sympathize and comfort him.

And they don’t even recognize him from a distance! Job’s grief is so deep and pervasive that he looks different. Grief isn’t simply an emotional thing; it’s physical, too. It can take a toll on us. It can make us sleep too much or not

enough, gain or lose weight, make us sick, and add stress. It can be both exhausting and scary.

Take a look at this sculpture that shows a physical response:

SHOW SLIDES: Picture of sculpture “The Weight of Grief”

And now another picture that shows a compassion companion response:

So when Job’s friends see how deeply he’s hurting, they do what they know to do; they weep and mourn with him. They tear their clothing as a sign of grief. They put dust on their heads. They enter into Job’s grief with him. They sit on the ground for seven days and nights. And here’s an interesting thing: “No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”

How many of us can be silent and simply be with one another in our grief? How many times do we struggle to say something - anything - that doesn’t sound totally trite or flippant?

I’ll confess that it’s very hard for me. I want to fill the space. I want to make it better. I want to fix it. I want to solve it.

And sometimes I want to avoid it altogether because I don’t know what to say. I don’t want to make anyone any more sad than they already are. And yet, I’m thankful for Lisa Wypa who told me that talking about her son, Nik, who died six years ago, doesn’t make the pain any worse. It’s already hard. Remembering Nik is what’s important to her.

I’m thankful for my good friend who told me that talking about life struggles was the most helpful thing for her - not avoiding it, but also talking to trusted people who weren’t judging her or trying to give advice - and another friend who said that acknowledging and allowing emotions is vital.

It’s a delicate dance, and I invite you to see a powerful video about how we help one another in grief:

SHOW MEDIA: “How to Help a Grieving Friend...”

This is one of the most profound and helpful explanations I’ve ever seen.

Imagine it: “The way to help someone feel better is to let them be in pain.”

If we’re honest, that’s true. We want someone to listen. We want to be heard. We want others to acknowledge our pain. They don’t have to understand it, but how powerful it is for someone to simply be with us instead of trying to cheer us up or tell us to get over it.

It really does go against what we’re taught because we do avoid sadness. It’s difficult to see people we love in pain. But grief can’t be avoided forever. It really is a journey we walk. We can’t take away another’s pain, so we need to acknowledge it. That’s how we support each other. And I’ve memorized that line:

“Acknowledgement makes things better even when they can’t be made right.” A friend said that unconditional support was an incredible gift in her grieving process.

We’re called to be with each other in grief without trying to answer “why?” That’s a reflection of how God is with us. Does that mean we’re going to do it perfectly? Probably not. We will let each other down, and we’re not God, who is faithful to be with us always. But we are the Body of Christ and called to reflect God’s love and care. God’s caring is shown through the Body of Christ, and that matters.

Mary Ann Froehlich says, “When our pain makes it hard to feel God’s presence, God will often send an actual person, touched by God’s Spirit, to cling to us and not let go.” This is what Job’s friends do at first. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Silent comforters are the true mediators of God.” Translation: It’s okay to be silent – not to say anything to those who are grieving.

Job’s friends have the right idea. The gift of time and care is their offering. It’s what they have to give to their friend in his deep grief. And it lasts for seven days. But then they try to explain things. They move from being compassionate companions who are simply with Job in silence to people who offer unwanted advice. They try to answer questions that can’t be answered. They even confront Job and try to explain his suffering.

Most of us may think of Job and immediately think of suffering, and that’s true. The profound loss and grief Job experiences is difficult enough, but then add in Job’s struggle with God - and his friends who don’t help.

Now that’s not to say that they’re the only reason that Job struggles. Perhaps he’d struggle either way, but how can we be compassionate companions? How can we make the journey not any worse than it already is?

Today you have a list that might offer a start. It’s not complete, and you may even read it and disagree with parts of it. These are collected from our church family and from others I’ve asked who have experienced grief. I want to offer a disclaimer: if you’ve ever said something on the “what not to say” list, don’t worry. We’ve all done it. I don’t think any of us is trying to be insensitive or uncaring. It’s not intentional, and yet we can do better.

Listening is a part of the process - deep listening. That means that we listen without trying to tell our own story. It might seem obvious, but how often do we really listen to understand instead of listening to respond? How quick are we to jump in, interrupt, and offer advice rather than simply being with someone? **SHOW SLIDE:** “There is no greater gift you can give someone in grief than to ask

them about their love one...And then, really listen.” This goes for death or any other kind of grief. Listening is key.

So, that means we might have to be quiet and intentionally stay quiet to allow someone to share what they need to share. And it might look like this:

SHOW SLIDE: Picture of yes/no - duct tape over mouth

We don't have to try to speak for God either. God is big enough to take whatever a grieving person has to say. Honest prayers and questions do not offend God. I truly believe that God welcomes them as a sign of our engagement with God.

Last week we read the story of Jesus weeping with Lazarus' family. I invite us to think about Jesus on the cross. As he was dying, he said the words of a psalm he knew - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If we're ever doubtful that God can handle our questions and doubts, we only need to remember that Jesus, in all of his humanity and in all of his divinity, expressed his own.

So perhaps the words of Psalm 23 can help us, too. Being a compassionate companion is an opportunity for someone who is grieving to feel God's presence and to know that they are not alone. When someone is facing death, divorce, job loss, illness, family strife, or anything else, we can say, "God is with you. I am with you. We are with you."

We cannot take away or minimize the pain of loss, but we affirm by our presence that God loves, cares, and is with us in our grief. And we can be confident in God's presence because that's the promise Jesus gave - that the Holy Spirit - the Paraclete, which can mean counselor or comforter - would come, and the Spirit did come! We don't go this alone! Even as we listen and care, the Holy Spirit is with us offer guidance.

So I invite you to think about who has been a compassionate companion to you. How did their care show you the love of God? How can we do the same for others? May God help us. Let us pray:

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE