

“Living in Two Worlds”

November 4, 2018

Good Grief? Series – All Saints Sunday

It happened to me on a Sunday morning before worship when the choir was rehearsing. It was after my grandma died - I don't remember how long after - but we were singing “In Christ Alone.” I love that song, but the words hit just right that morning: *No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny...* The words got stuck in my throat.

Some call it an ambush of grief, and it can happen anywhere at any time. Hearing a song, seeing a friend, smelling a scent that brings a memory, finding a recipe card or a note written by a loved one, listening to a voicemail or a recording on an answering machine can bring tears whether it's a recent loss or not.

Maybe you've experienced something like that, and maybe you thought you were alone and that it only happened to you. Let me assure you, it's totally normal. Grief is a common human experience (it will happen to all of us), yet so very individual (we all grieve differently). There's not a right way to do it. There's not a timeline or a time limit.

We're spending this month focusing on grief and how we live with it. Today we'll focus more on the grief of death, but we'll also look at grief in more general terms because so many life situations are painful and cause us to grieve.

Grief is hard (that's the understatement of the century!), it hurts, and it's complicated. And what does a vacuum do? (It sucks.) It's the same with grief. Someone described grief as feeling both totally numb and in pain at the same time. Grief isn't a problem we solve, but a journey we walk through. We can't go around it or avoid it thinking that it will just go away, as much as we might want to try. Grief is normal and natural. We must go through it, knowing that it really does change us.

Death is a part of our lives, but we don't like to talk about it. We know how difficult it is, right? We don't even like to say, “He died” or “she died.” It seems like a harsh way to speak. We say “passed away” or “passed on” or “went to be with Jesus.” It's just hard to talk about it, even though we know it's a part of life. We know that everyone experiences it; it's not something we can escape. Yet, the sense of finality is scary.

I'd invite you to see a part of a BBC production called “Like Minds” that focuses on grief. The title is “Grief: It's not something you have to “get over.”” The voice you'll hear is a woman named Cate, a psychotherapist who specializes in bereavement.

SHOW MEDIA: *Grief...from BBC video*

I found this image and explanation so helpful because it's realistic. We don't simply get over the loss of a loved one and move on. Rather, that person's life and memory become a part of us. We move forward with the memories that we hold dear and the blessing of that life as a part of ours. **SHOW SLIDE:** Perhaps Winnie the Pooh says it well: "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

We know that Jesus grieved. Grief isn't a sign of weakness of faith or a lack of trust in God, and I want to make that clear today. I've heard people say that other persons of faith have told them that if you're a Christian, you shouldn't grieve. That's absolutely false – and simply untrue.

Jesus experienced grief – both his own and the grief of others. He held them both. Grief is a part of our God-given humanity, and it reflects a deep sense of love for others. "Grief is the last act of love we have to give to those we loved. Where there is deep grief, there was great love."

Jamie Anderson says, "Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go." Friends, that's an important perspective to hear. We grieve because we love. Jesus did, too.

So we really are living in two worlds. We're bound to eternity "by love's strong cord" as the hymn says, and we have hope in eternal life as we remember those we love who have died. And we're called to love God and others here and now.

We live in the tension between life and death every day. Today we remember the saints - those we love who are now in the fullness of God's presence - probably with a mix of emotions. Eternal life is what connects us to the saints, so even though they are not here with us, we can be confident that we share in the hope, riches, and power that they experience now. You and I carry with us the faith that they lived and shared. That spiritual connection is something that death can never sever. It doesn't mean that we don't feel the grief and pain of separation, but we also trust in the deeper spiritual connection of eternal life.

SHOW SLIDE: Again, wisdom from Winnie the Pooh to his friend, Piglet: "If there ever comes a day where we can't be together, keep me in your heart. I'll stay there forever."

That's the hope in Revelation. Nothing can take away the pain of death and grief, but the promises in Revelation offer something beyond what we experience at this moment. There will be peace and comfort – maybe not now, but it's a certainty - a guarantee - down the road. There's incredible hope in the promise that God is working on something new. And this promise: no more death, no mourning or crying or pain. Can you imagine?

The Book of Revelation was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Domitian, who was in power from 81-96 AD. During his reign, Christians were persecuted. There were internal divisions in the church mainly over false teachings. One Christian leader, whom we know as John the Seer, was sent to the island of Patmos as punishment. While he was there, he saw visions and communicated his visions with symbols as a way to ensure that other Christians could receive them.

If you've ever read through Revelation, you've encountered some strange and confusing images. Different traditions have different ideas about what the symbols mean and how these visions play out in the end. But this vision of a new heaven and a new earth is powerful.

John offered his fellow followers of Jesus comfort in the midst of what they were experiencing and hope for what God was doing. One writer says that John wrote to others to control their fear, renew their commitment, and sustain their vision in a time when all anyone could see was cruelty, death, and hopelessness. Perhaps it's a word for us, too.

God hasn't given up. This world matters to God, and we matter to God. Our grief matters to God. But there's the promise: death and destruction don't win in the end. Violence, cynicism, hatred, oppression, and injustice will not last. Just when we think it's too late or all hope is lost, God is always doing a new thing.

That's great news, but it's not just a platitude. Listen up, because we're a part of it! Yes, we claim the promise of eternal life with God, but we also don't sit and wait passively. God doesn't work alone. God invites us to share in working for good – even when the situation seems utterly hopeless.

No disaster can take away hope that is grounded in God, and we witness great hope and love in response to human struggles. Even this week, I saw a post on Facebook from the Jewish Temple in downtown Muskegon of a sign and flowers that someone left there to remind that community that they are not alone in their grief. We stand with them and grieve with them.

Death and grief are real and difficult, but they can't take away hope. When we experience the loss of a loved one, we know that our hope in God's love and comfort is stronger than death can ever be. It doesn't make it easy, but it does make a difference. Hope is stronger than fear, and fear of death is dispelled when we trust in God's gift of eternal life.

In spite of all that's happening in the world, we believe that love and grace will win every time. In spite of whatever we face today, God is with us and is doing a new thing that moves toward life and hope.

We come to the table as a reminder of God's grace and love in our lives. We're surrounded by the communion of saints as we break bread together. We grieve because we love, and we trust in God to hold our pain and walk with us on the journey. We can count on it. We can trust in it. We can claim the hope of eternal life and work for God's Kingdom right now.

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