

**Allowing Ourselves to Grieve**  
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*“Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).*

These are the words that Jesus speaks in the second Beatitude. It is not easy to lose a loved one. ***These words assure us of the Lord’s comfort.*** These are important words for the family and friends who have lost a loved one. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12a) speak of good things for those who follow the Lord. Thus, they are a source of hope as we grieve the death of a loved one who strived to live by the teaching of the Beatitudes. They are a source of strength as we grieve. This passage (Matthew 5:1-12a) is one of the most commonly chosen gospel readings for funeral Mass.

What is the most common gospel passage for funerals? John 14:1-6. It too gives us ***hope*** with Jesus’ words assuring us that He goes to prepare a place in his Father’s house for all who believe in him as “*the way and the truth and the life.*” It assures us that when we lose a loved one to earthly death, there is more to life than what we see in this world.

The passing of a loved one can be very emotional. Sometimes we feel that we have to hide our feelings when we lose a loved one. We want to give the appearance of being strong. However, being strong does not preclude being sad.

We might want to be strong for others, particularly children. However, in not showing our emotions to them, we might actually be setting a bad example. In hiding our emotions, they might have the impression that we are not sad. This could lead them to think they should not be sad, maybe even think that there is something wrong with them if they are sad and cry.

There are times when we are grieving that we need to “manage” our emotions. I was going to say “control” instead of “manage” but I think manage is a better word if we want to truly allow ourselves to grieve. Our emotions are real. We do not need to stop them (aka control them). We do need to be aware of our emotions and allow them to help us honor our loved one who has died.

For instance, when one meets with the funeral director to make the funeral arrangements, one might be tempted to set aside one’s emotions to focus on the logistics. We think we need to be in complete control. We do not. We need to grieve. This is why there are funeral directors. The funeral director is there to help the family plan everything. A key part of the funeral director’s role is to coordinate with the cemetery, church, and ministers to relieve you of this task. You may need to meet with the cemetery staff to pick out a grave. You may meet with someone from the church to select readings and/or music and to talk about your loved one.<sup>1</sup> Yet, you do not need to be the one who coordinates everything. This is what the funeral director does. They know what needs to be done. Allow them to control the funeral process so that you may focus on your love for your deceased loved one.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on selecting readings and music, see my blog article, “Why Do We Celebrate Funerals” at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=3137>

It is a Corporal Work of Mercy to bury the dead (see Tobit 1:16-18). The body is not just an empty shell to be discarded after death. The body and soul were one in this world and will be again at the Resurrection. Even after death we treat the body with dignity.

We see importance of taking proper care of the body after death in the Stations of the Cross. The Stations are the story of Jesus' Passion, the suffering He went through for us in his final hours. His suffering culminates in his Crucifixion, his death on the Cross as He freely gives his life for our sins. **Thank you Jesus!** His death is the Twelfth Station. However, there are fourteen stations. The Thirteenth Station is Jesus taken down from the Cross. In the Fourteenth Station, Jesus is laid in the tomb.

They did not abandon Jesus' body at death. All four gospels tell the story of Jesus' Passion. All four gospels include Jesus being laid in the tomb (Matthew 27:57-61, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42). These passages speak of Jesus being wrapped in a linen cloth, anointed with oils<sup>2</sup>, and being laid in the tomb. These were the funeral customs of the time. This is the way they fulfilled the Corporal Work of Mercy to bury the dead. It is not simply a physical act of "disposing of the body." It is a ritual act of mourning.

I have been using both the word "grieving" and the word "mourning." The two are intimately connected. In his book, *Here on the Way to There: A Catholic Perspective on Dying and What Follows*<sup>3</sup>, Monsignor Shannon writes, "There is a difference between grief and mourning. Grief refers to the inner feelings and emotions evoked by the loss of a loved one. Mourning is grief's external expression." He goes on to say, "Mourning may be thought of as all the actions and rituals we use to give external expression to our grief."<sup>4</sup>

For the Jews of Jesus' day, the actions and rituals included the linen cloth, anointing, and laying the body in the tomb. For us today, our mourning rituals *normally* include calling hours, a funeral service (normally a Mass in church for Catholics), burial, and often a gathering after the burial.<sup>5</sup> It is our custom to include prayer in the service/Mass and burial (The calling hours may also include a short prayer service). This is in keeping with the Spiritual Work of Mercy to pray for the living and the dead.<sup>6</sup>

These customs are designed to help us grieve, to grieve **with** hope. The calling hours can be important time to realize we do not have to grieve alone. Just as the widow who lost her only son

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<sup>2</sup> This is an anointing after death. It is not the *same* anointing we offer in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick before a person dies.

<sup>3</sup> Shannon, Rev. Msgr. William H. Shannon, *Here on the Way to There: A Catholic Perspective on Dying and What Follows*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press. 2005. 86.

<sup>4</sup> Shannon, 88.

<sup>5</sup> I said *normally* include. There may be circumstances that dictate otherwise. Currently, the precautions against the Coronavirus restrict large gatherings. So, the calling hours and/or a reception are often eliminated. In some cases, the entire funeral customs are being delayed months. In other cases, apart from the Coronavirus, calling hours are not done because our deceased loved one is predeceased by most of their family and friends so it may not seem necessary to include these. In other cases, when the deceased or their loved ones are not religious, funeral services centered on prayer are omitted. We can still offer our private prayers for them.

<sup>6</sup> For more on praying for the dead, see my homily from an annual Mass of Remembrance in November given in November of 2019 at St. Luke the Evangelist Parish at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=3021>.

was joined by a large group (Luke 7:11-17), we are supported by the compassion of others who come to express their sympathy for our loss. Those who join us at the calling hours and/or funeral service share in the Spiritual Work of Mercy to pray for the living and the dead as they pray for us (the living) and for our deceased loved one.<sup>7</sup>

The gathering together in prayer with readings from scripture and recalling the Resurrection remind us that in death we are consoled “by the promise of immortality to come” and that “life is changed, not ended” in death (Preface I for the Dead at Mass).

These funeral customs are important instruments to help us find closure with our loved one’s death. We each grieve differently and at different rates. There is no correct length of time for grieving. When earthly death is known to be approaching because of serious illness or old age, the grieving may begin before death. In such cases, we might think this eliminates grieving after death. I know from my own experience of my mother’s passing, it does not. She suffered for several years with emphysema and COPD. So, I knew death would be coming. Then, she was diagnosed with lung cancer so death became imminent. I was grieving the illnesses and the anticipated loss. I still grieved more after her death. This is normal. After death, there is no defined length of time for grieving (Monsignor Shannon does suggest one might seek help if grieving continues one year after the death of our loved one, 88).

The aforementioned book by Monsignor Shannon, *Here on the Way to There*, discusses dying as moving from “here” (life in this world) to “there” (the life to come.) Thus, it is not a book specifically on grieving. However, it does provide us valuable help in understanding grieving. I mentioned anticipatory grief<sup>8</sup> above. Monsignor Shannon writes

It is clear, then, that death and dying represent two different experiences; still we need to look at them in terms of continuity and discontinuity. There is continuity between dying and death because *our existence continues after death*. There is discontinuity, because *our existence after death is radically different from our existence before death*. Before death, our existence is mortal; after death it is immortal.<sup>9</sup>

I see our understanding of this concept as vital to truly allowing ourselves to grieve. We begin to grieve as the loss of our loved one approaches. We grieve after their death. We grieve knowing that their existence, *their life* did not end in earthly death but it is changed as they move through Purgatory to immortal life in the Kingdom of Heaven, in the place Jesus has prepared for them in his Father’s house.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection, earthly death was “*the veil that veils all peoples*” (see Isaiah 25:6a, 7-9, a good option for the Old Testament reading at the funeral). They saw death as

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<sup>7</sup> For more on why we celebrate funerals, see my blog article, “Why Do We Celebrate Funerals” at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=3137> and my homily given on the 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time on November 12, 2017 at <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=2323> (this homily includes the current Catholic understanding of cremation. Other related materials can be found on my website at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/funerals--mass-intentions--and-purgatory.html>).

<sup>8</sup> Monsignor Shannon discusses anticipatory grief on pages 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Shannon, *Here on the Way to There*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> John 14:1-6.

an “end”. This affected the way they looked at life in this world. Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection understood *together* shows us that God has power even over death. Our existence continues beyond earthly death. All who believe in Jesus as “*the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6) will spend eternity in Heaven. We thank Jesus for making this possible as He freely sacrificed his life for us on the Cross.

As I said above, we each grieve differently. There is no set way to grieve. To allow ourselves to grieve, it is helpful to understand how we might grieve. Monsignor Shannon gives us some guidance on understanding our grieving using Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s five psychological stages of the dying process as found in her book, *On Death and Dying* (1969).<sup>11</sup> It is essential to understand that she wrote these as stages of dying, not as grieving. Given that and the fact that we all deal with loss differently, both before death and after, all the stages may not apply in our grieving. To the extent they do apply, they may occur in different order. I would suggest that we also may grieve differently at different points in our lives for different people.

This being said, the five stages of dying are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

### *Denial*

When we find out we (or someone we love) are dying, we may “deny” that this news is true. We might think the diagnosis must be wrong. In our grieving after the loss of a loved one, one might think “denial” of the loss is not possible when we see the body of our loved one. However, there may be times when the death is sudden. Perhaps our loved one dies in a tragic accident. Maybe they appear healthy but suffer a massive heart attack resulting in death. Maybe they were sick but we did not know it. In any of these cases, denial is possible, perhaps even likely. Even when the death was expected because of an illness, we might not want to accept it, thinking treatment was still possible. As I mentioned above, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. When she was diagnosed, the doctors immediately started talking about treatment. I assumed this meant they were hopeful about treatment. Six weeks later, she was dead. I do not think I *denied* she had passed but yet I did wonder what happened to the *human* hope of treatment. Our funeral customs help us to face the reality that our loved one has indeed passed from this world.

### *Anger*

Anger may come in different ways. If our loved one died in an accident caused by another person, we might be angry with that person. If they died as the victim of a violent crime, we may likely have some anger towards the criminal.<sup>12</sup> If they die from illness, maybe there is some anger if we think more should have been done to treat them. As I write this, we are under Coronavirus restrictions. These restrictions have meant that some people have died without their loved ones at their side. This might result in some anger. No matter the circumstances of our loved one’s death, we might be angry with God for allowing our loved one “to be taken from us.” It can be important for us to acknowledge our anger. If you are angry with God, talk to him about it. God has big shoulders. We may not get an answer to why our loved one passed away but God will hold us in his arms if we let him.

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<sup>11</sup> Shannon, *Here on the Way to There*, 12, 74, 86.

<sup>12</sup> If you continue to have such anger, you might view my video presentation, *Why Is It So Hard to Forgive Myself (and Others)?* at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---why-is-it-so-hard-to-forgive.html>.

### *Bargaining*

This might be the one stage of dying from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross that seems to have the least to do with grieving *after* death as it may seem too late for bargaining. Here, I think of the conversation between Martha and Jesus *after* the death of her brother Lazarus:

*Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. [But] even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise." Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:21-26).*

Martha could have chosen to be angry with Jesus for not having come sooner so that He could have healed Lazarus. She did not choose to be angry. Instead, she trusted Jesus to do what is right. We do not need to bargain with Jesus. He will do what is right.

### *Depression*

After the loss of our loved one, in our grief, we will likely experience some loneliness. We miss them. This is natural. This is good. It means we love them. We may wish that either we had more time with them in that they lived longer or we may lament not having spent more time with them while they were alive. This is natural. We cannot change how much time we spent with them in the past (although it might be a motivator for us to cherish the time we have with others still with us). Nor can we extend the length of their life.

### *Acceptance*

What can we do with the denial, anger, and depression? We move to the fifth stage, *acceptance*. With faith in God and hope in eternal life, it will come. It may come soon. It may take a while. Remember, as we grieve, *we do not grieve alone*. Perhaps we have other people who share in our grieving in some way. Regardless, *we do not grieve alone*, we do not grieve alone for the Lord is our shepherd, for as the psalmist says, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me*" (Psalm 23:4).

More and more people are eliminating pieces of the traditional funeral customs. For some, this is because they no longer believe in God. So, there is no prayer ritual at death. There is no hope of life continuing after death. That changes the way they look at death. I can only surmise that earthly death is a final end for them.

Even some religious people are choosing to not have a funeral service. These people may be among those who describe themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious." It is my prayer that this article helps you understand how turning to our faith when we lose a loved one is important to help us grieve in hope, in hope of eternal life that is revealed to us by Jesus. Burying the dead is not something we do just to dispose of the body. It is a work of mercy. It is a work of faith. It is a work of hope.