

Sermon 011716 Death
Scripture John 11:28-35
Sermon Title Left Behind

The timing of this sermon is predicated on a recent loss of a loved one in my life and all the losses we have experienced in the last year at Union Church. It turns me to the topic of death but more specifically, grief.

The Bible has a lot to say about death, but it speaks mostly to what might happen after you die, the notion of eternal life. It speaks very little beyond the passage we just heard from John's Gospel about the experience of the loved ones still alive after losing a loved one to death. In the gospel passage, Mary and Martha are weeping over the death of their brother Lazarus. Jesus arrives on the scene and joins them in their grief and Jesus weeps, too. We'll get back to that but it is worth noting that there is so little in Scripture about grief. People often use the Bible to help them through difficult times. In that way, the Bible falls short. There are other places to go, however, and we'll get to that.

What I would like to speak to today is the experience of being left behind... losing a loved one and entering into grief. As I have said, we have had many deaths at Union Church in the two and a half years since I've been here. A few have had the excruciating experience of losing adult children. Even those who

lost loved ones that lived long and full lives still are driven into the valley of grief.

We've had a rash of deaths in my family, some in the upper generation, but the ones that hurt the most are the ones of my generation. We've lost four loved ones in the upper generation and three in my generation the last 3plus years including just recently, my cousin Gloria Fluet.

I started this sermon just a few days after Gloria died because I wanted the depth of the experience of loss to be fresh in my mind.

This is a sermon about loss not a eulogy for Gloria, but I need to tell you a few things so that you know at least a little about my relationship with her. It's complicated, so let's just call her my cousin. You know when you go to family gatherings how you gravitate to some people and... ahem... avoid others? I found in Gloria a sweetness, a gentleness, a warmth, a goodness, and a sense of humor that drew me to her. I was drawn to her husband Ronnie in a completely different way. Ronnie and I, along with other guys in the family, hunted many times in the deep woods of Maine on the boarder of Canada. There is male bonding in that setting that you carry with you the rest of your life.

But Gloria had a spirit in her that made me feel better about the world and myself when I was in her presence. She was special.

She thought I was special, too. Before Meg happened in my life she used to say that I was her back up. If anything ever happened to Ronnie, I'd be called in from the bullpen. I was good with that. By the way, Meg and Gloria loved each other. Meg had a huge part not only for me but for Gloria, Ronnie, and my cousin Jeannie who was in the situation as much as me.

Gloria had an auto immune disease called lupus for most of her adult life. She struggled with her health every day and some days she could not get out of bed. Then, over a year ago, she was diagnosed with a bone cancer. She entered a study at the Dana Farber Cancer institute so that she spent 21 days quarantined in a hospital room. Her immediate family was in Maine and had the same allergic reaction to driving in Boston that many of you have. I was the one who visited with her the most.

We spent hours talking about everything from family to recipes to Patriots and Red Sox to God to love to life and death. We also, as usual, laughed a lot. I was her spiritual companion through her ordeal. Then when she got out she felt good for a while and we continued with weekly phone calls.

Then, everything fell apart, she landed back in the hospital and died in the week between Christmas and New Years. I got up to Sanford, Maine as quickly as I could (Union Church was in the

midst of a rash of death and hospitalizations) to be with the family. But, I dropped into the valley of grief and I am still there.

In her landmark book, *On Grief and Grieving*, Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote that there are five stages of grieving: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Bargaining is when you lie awake at night feeling guilty about what you did or did not do for the deceased. For example saying, “Why didn’t I say I love you in that last phone call?” I had no bargaining issue with Gloria. I was a good spiritual companion to her. That you might have been caught up in that. I urge you to let it go. Your loved one knows you loved him or her. Nothing more needed to be said or done.

I did have the denial immediately. I was speaking with Molly and Al Ciri soon after losing Gloria and Molly said it well. She said, “When you have those little surprise moments of realization that your loved one is dead and you won’t see her anymore, it’s like they die for you again.” It is so painful.

I had the anger, too. This time directed at the docs. It’s okay to be angry when you lose someone. Pick something... the person who died, the docs, the situation, whatever... anger is part of it.

Depression, you bet. It aches. It’s lonely. It’s darkness in the spirit. It’s real and it’s true. I’d like to go back to our gospel story. When Mary and Martha were weeping, Jesus entered into

their sorrow and wept with them. This is Jesus being his most human. When you experience grief, don't do it alone. Find someone who will cry with you. You are the fortunate ones. You not only have your church but your church has an active Stephan Ministry. Use it. Helping you with your grief is why Stephan Ministry exists. They also have a series of four small booklets for those in the grieving process that are wonderful for the grieving.

Acceptance... sure. I, and those who loved Gloria selfishly wanted to keep her here. But her suffering was great and it is over now. I will be forever grateful for my time with Gloria. I still love her and still live within her love. I'm a better person for having known her.

There is a dynamic in the grief process. It's not a smooth progression from denial to anger, to bargaining, to depression, to acceptance. You can be all the way to acceptance and be back at denial or anger in a nanosecond.

So there are resources available to you when you enter into grief. I recommend the Kubler-Ross book be read when all is well. It will help you prepare for the grieving process. Remember, it is not a matter of if you will grieve; it is when.

Use your family and your church, especially Stephan Ministries when you are in grief. There is another resource that I want to put out to you. We have already done a book group on

this. It is another landmark book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner. Many, many people in times of affliction ask questions like, “Why is God letting this happen?” or “Why is God doing this to me.” They run the risk of getting angry with God turning away from God. There are people who have a loved one die and vow never to go into a church again.

In his book, Kushner makes the case beautifully that God does not exercise God’s power by sending problems. God’s power is in giving strength when problems come. Again, this book is to be read when things are well.

Of course, we have our Stephan Ministers. I’ve asked them to sit in on the sermon talk back after worship this morning. They are all about confidentiality but they might be able to share some insights as to what it is like to walk with someone through grief.

Another strategy in dealing with grief is simple. Be nice to yourself. Do the things you like to do and don’t do the things you don’t like to do. Be with people you want to be with and avoid the people you don’t want to be with. I was feeling blue and reached out to one of my favorite people, Eddie. I told him I lost a loved one and could use some Eddie time. He adjusted his busy schedule and we had a nice dinner with our wives. It was great and it helped.

Of course, grief is not restricted to being left behind when a loved one dies. You can enter into grief at the loss of a job, or divorce, or bad medical report, or an illness of a loved one. Any number of things can plunge you into grief.

What you want to do is prepare yourself for grief. Like anything, grief can be done poorly or well, depending upon how well or not so well the individual is equipped. We can all probably name people in our lives that are stuck in grief and maybe always will be. There is another side to the valley of grief. You never forget the one you lost. It's tragic when one person dies. You can't let two people die. Go through the valley of grief and make sure someday you'll laugh again, sing again, dance again, live again, love again. That's why preparation and resources are so important.

Finally, I'll leave you with this. Let's go back to the scene in today's gospel where Jesus entered into the grief of his friends Mary and Martha so that he was driven to weep, too. It is true for you. When you grieve and you weep, Jesus weeps with you. Let the Lord in and he will heal you. It is what he does. AMEN