

Life Goes on

In our scripture reading from Samuel today we hear the story of David's son being killed even though his orders were to "deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." When he asked the Cushite "is it well with the young man Absalom?" he was answered "the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." Even though Absalom had begun a civil war against him, David wept. He grieved the loss of his son. John 11:35, which many of you know as the shortest verse in the Bible, says that "Jesus wept." He was mourning the loss of his friend Lazarus. In Matthew 14:13, Jesus again experienced grief when he learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist and he went to a deserted place in solitude. Judas committed suicide because of his grief and guilt over the betrayal of Jesus. Genesis 50:1 tells us that when Jacob died, "Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him." Poor Job lost everything, his servants, his sheep, his children and in his grief he got up and tore his robe and shaved his head.

Grief is something we all will experience sometime in our lives. Many of us already have. I have heard, as many of you probably have, that there are 5 stages of grief. I decided to look them up online and here is what I found.

The first stage is:

Denial, numbness, and shock: This stage serves to protect us from experiencing the intensity of the loss. It may be useful when we must take action (for example, making funeral arrangements). Numbness is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring." As we slowly acknowledge the impact of the loss, denial and disbelief will diminish.

Bargaining: This stage may involve persistent thoughts about what could have been done to prevent the loss. We can become preoccupied about ways that things could have been better. If this stage is not properly resolved, intense feelings of remorse or guilt may interfere with the healing process.

Depression: This stage of grief occurs in some people after we realize the true extent of the loss. Signs of depression may include sleep and appetite disturbances, a lack of energy and concentration, and crying spells. We may feel loneliness, emptiness, isolation, and self-pity.

Anger: This reaction usually occurs when we feel helpless and powerless. Anger can stem from a feeling of abandonment through a loved one's death. We may be angry at a higher power or toward life in general.

Acceptance: In time, we may be able to come to terms with various feelings and accept the fact that the loss has occurred. Healing can begin once the loss becomes integrated into our set of life experiences.

I learned that we don't necessarily go through all of these stages and not in any nicely defined order. It is actually more like a roller coaster...up one minute, down the next. I have learned this first hand.

As you know, my mother passed away in January. The day after she died, my father called me to tell me he had bone cancer and 2 months later, he was also gone. I really hate roller coasters so this hasn't been an easy ride.

I have been through all of these stages at various times and just when I think I am OK and at the acceptance stage, I move back to depression or bargaining. Obviously when my mother passed, I was shocked, as was the entire church. The first few weeks I kept saying to myself, "this isn't possible, she can't be gone." But reality started to sink in and I realized that life still had to go on. Soon Easter came...the "first" holiday. My whole family chipped in to cook and we had our traditional Easter dinner at my mother's house. We missed her but we all got through the day just fine. Then came Mother's day. It was a little rough but again, I got through it. Now, when her birthday came in July, that was another story. I had a total

meltdown at work. I couldn't stop crying and could not function. I had to leave after 2 hours.

I have learned some things to help get through this process. First, there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is no "normal" period of time for mourning. I have heard some say that a year is long enough. Some say a few months. Some say years. But we are all different and we all will grieve differently and for different lengths of time. It is not selfish or immature or revealing of weak faith to grieve. It just means we are human and that we love deeply.

Second, I learned that ignoring your feelings will not allow you to heal. We need to recognize our pain, allowing ourselves to actively grieve and express our feelings of sadness. Someone said to me one day in church, "you haven't had time to grieve." I thought about that and I realized she was right. With the deaths of my parents so close together I hardly had time to breathe. So I made the time. I went to the cemetery and talked to my mom. I cried myself to sleep. I cried in the shower. I let myself experience the feelings of sadness and loss and emptiness. I acknowledged my pain and faced my grief head on. I spent time alone because sometimes it was too painful to be around anyone or even come to church. But I also realized

that being alone too much was not really a healthy way to deal with it. This is the third thing that I learned so I turned to my church family and to Pastor Bob. Looking to loved ones and other close friends and allowing them to share in your sorrow is incredibly healing. Accept help when offered. You may think you don't need it or, like me, you have trouble accepting it, but do it anyway. Not only will it help you but those who you are leaning on are grieving as well, if not for your loved one, for you, and it will help them to heal.

The reading from 1 Kings today was about Elijah but it struck me as quite appropriate when I read it.

19:5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."

19:6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

19:7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

19:8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

An angel twice came to him and touched him telling him to get up and eat. The second time he said if he didn't eat the journey would be too much for him.

That is what grief is...a journey. The friends and family that we look to for support are like the angel encouraging us to go on when we think we can't take one more step. Sharing memories and stories about your lost loved one with family and friends also helps the healing process.

Speaking of eating, that is the next thing I learned. Grief is exhausting. I realized that I must take care of myself. I found that sometimes I wasn't eating, I wasn't sleeping well, I had no energy or desire to do anything. I had to push myself to do things around the house. I had to remember to eat. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;" We must take care of ourselves on this journey so that we can be that temple.

They say time heals all wounds. I'm not sure they ever go away completely but they lessen enough that we can begin to accept and live our new "normal." Things will never be quite like they were but that doesn't mean they can't be good.

The last thing that I learned was to remember my faith. Loss is a part of life and grief is the natural response to that loss. But those of us that have faith know that it is only a temporary separation. In Psalm 56:8 David says "You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" (ESV). Isn't that image of God catching our tears so beautiful? He sees our grief and is ever faithful. He is always with us. Matthew 5:4 says "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." God is our great comforter and he assures us that we will see our loved ones again. We can have peace and joy knowing that they are spending their days with him in Heaven. I know that my parents are there watching down on their children and I know that they are in a much better place now. We can rejoice for the lives they had here on earth and rejoice even more knowing they are in their heavenly bodies with no pain or illness or suffering. Our ever faithful Father offers that to all of us.

We will all at some time experience grief. But we grieve as people with hope, as people who believe in everlasting life, as people who believe that death is not

the end of life, but the entrance into new life with Christ and the community of saints. Our grief is deep, sorrowful, and difficult, but it is not without hope. Our hope lies in the resurrection of Christ.

In the book Good Grief by Granger E. Westberg there is a story of a widow who had acted very strangely ever since her musician husband died 20 years ago. She kept the music studio just as he left it when he died. She locked the keyboard of his piano and would not allow anyone to ever enter the room. She consistently refused to re-enter life again.

This woman got stuck somewhere along the way in the stages of grief. Maybe she had no one to help her deal with all of her emotions...her depression, her guilt, and her anger. Perhaps she felt her only friend was her deceased husband, and that she had to remain loyal to him. So she locked the keyboard of the piano because she wanted no one else ever to play it again.

Rabbi Joshua Liebman in his book Peace of Mind writes about the temptation not to return to living with a follow up to this story of the widow. Says Liebman, "The melody that the loved one played upon the piano of your life will never be played quite that way again, but we must not close the keyboard and allow the instrument to gather dust. We must seek out other artists of the spirit, new friends who gradually will help us find the road to life again, who will walk that road with us." 2

My new normal isn't always going to be easy. There will be times that I will be sad and I know that. I know that my mother wouldn't want me to be sad though...she would want to me to on living. I also know that our Lord will always be by my side. He wants us to live and enjoy our time here on this earth. So, as hard as it might seem at times...life goes on.