

How do I deal with grief and loss.

November 2, 2008

All Saints Day sermon, Rev. 7: 9-17

Think about your first encounter with loss and death? I can remember mine clearly. There was a boy in my 6th grade class who was killed in an accidental drowning while on a Boy Scout outing to Yosemite. His death was sudden and shocking...someone our age had died. I was not especially close to this boy, but I knew him. He was just gone, his desk sat empty.

These were the days before sensitivity training, grief counseling and the like we have today. So school just continued on, with the empty desk there. And we just continued on as if nothing was different, but in our hearts we knew something had changed.

Grief is a part of life. It can touch us at any age. It does not discriminate against young and old, rich or poor, black or white...everyone comes to know it's icy feeling at some point in their lives.

But our understanding of grief is much different than when I was a 6th grader. The earth shattering work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and the stages of grief helped us understand and put a name on what was happening to us.

Grief comes whenever we suffer a significant loss. It is not limited to death, we can experience grief at the loss of our marriage, our home, our job, or even something as ethereal as a dream or great expectation we might have held dear. The severity of the grief we encounter depends proportionally on the significance of the loss. The death of a friend or co worker will not evoke the same grief within us as the death of a child or spouse.

Kubler-Ross was able to name the most common stages of the grieving process. It is important to remember that these are the most common, but not the absolute stages everyone goes through. Some folks will go through them in order and right on schedule, while for others the grief stages get all jumbled up and seem to come in random order, with some omitted. So if you have journeyed through the process in some different way, it is ok and normal. Not everyone goes through all the stages in the same way.

But most people's journey takes this path:

1. Shock and denial. This can't be happening. It seems like a dream. Everything is ok, nothing is wrong, nothing is happening. Sometimes we are shocked and it is as if the emotional circuit breakers trip off so we don't overload and blow up. Some part of us shuts down or overlooks what is really happening.

2. Anger. This stage of grief is often a surprise to people. They get angry at the person who died for leaving them! They know it is not always logical...of course they did not choose to die and leave you...but the reaction is really from the gut. This anger can bleed over into other areas of your life. You find yourself short with sales people, other drivers, or your kids...without real reason or provocation. You feel angry inside and like you might explode at any moment. You can feel angry at God, it is quite common and God is big enough to take it...really, you won't offend or hurt God!

3. Bargaining. There is often a desire to remake the reality we find ourselves unwillingly living through. This is often an attempt to regain some sense of control. During grief, we are pushed about by our emotions like a river overflowing its banks and pushing us along unwillingly. We want to reassert ourselves and our control...so we begin to try and make deals with ourselves, others and God.

4. Depression...or sadness. Remember, some things are depressing and it is ok to be depressed sometimes. Our culture is so afraid of negative emotions that it seems that there is no room for

sadness anymore. But some things will make us sad, if we are wired right! And it is ok to be sad, to be depressed, for awhile. If the depression gets too deep or goes too long...so as to profoundly affect your life and your relationships, then it is time to seek help. But following a death of a loved one, it is ok and normal to be sad and depressed.

6. Acceptance. We come, over time, to a sense of acceptance. We accept the grief and the loss, and allow ourselves to experience all it has for us...and we move through it. This acceptance does not mean that we are “back to normal”. Far from it.

I like to compare the loss of a close loved one to the amputation of a limb. It hurts like crazy at first, and there are phantom pains...where we forget that they aren't still there. Over time the wound begins to heal, but we are not the same. We learn to adjust to the loss of our limb, to do things differently, to make accommodation for our disability and loss...and sometimes we hit the scar just right and the pain comes rushing back just as it was when it first happened.

We come to acceptance, but we are not the same.

7. Hope. Finally we move to the last stage, where we find hope again. We begin to see the world and all its beauty and possibility again.

As Christians, we are human and we go through grief when we experience major loss...but we grieve. Grief is not a lack of faith, but part of being a human being. We grieve, but not as those without HOPE. We believe that the person who has died has gone to be with Christ Jesus our Lord, who loves us and forgives us and makes a place for us. We believe that they have gone to the place prepared for us in Christ...and we are given several pictures of what this place is like...to feed our hope and give us a sense of expectation and even joyful anticipation.

Rev 7: 9-17 is one such window into heaven! Hear again what John the visionary sees:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows."

Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

What beautiful images this passage has.

First, we see a great crowd in heaven in the presence of God and Jesus, the Lamb of God. The number no one could possibly count, people from every nation, tribe, people and language.

There will be a lot of surprises when it comes to who is in heaven. God is gracious and generous, and heaven is full of folks! YEA! And a lot of people will be surprised at who else is there!

Second, these are those who forgiven. This is key! They have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb and have become white as snow.

This is not a collection of the perfect and holy gathered before the throne of God to receive their due reward. This is not those who lived correctly and never sinned. We are not awarded our place in heaven by our success on earth--- NO. We are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God and who are saved solely and completely and only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Bible says that it is not by our good works that we enter heaven, but by God's gracious love in Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Does that mean we may take advantage of the grace of God? Well, folks have tried, but I wouldn't recommend it! Of course what we do still matters, but it is not what decides whether we enter heaven or not. Hear these words of Scripture:

“Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3: 10-15)

What a great image... The quality of our earthly works will be shown out in heaven...some gold, silver and precious stone...and those who have quality lives will receive a reward...but those whose works all burn away (straw, hay and grass!) are still saved...like a person running out of a burning home at night with nothing but their nightclothes on!

We are all washed clean in the blood of the lamb. All by Grace stand before God made clean.

Third, we see them joined by the angels and the four living creatures (who represent all the animals on earth) singing praises to the Glory of God and to the Lamb. Worthy is the Lamb who is slain to receive glory and honor and power forever and ever! Amen.

The image we see is not just of the large gathering of the redeemed, but of the intimate care of our God.

We are told that he will shelter them, literally to “Spread his tent” over us. This is an image from the middle east where some folks lived in tents their whole lives. It symbolizes God’s bringing us into his family, and sheltering us from all the outside things that might harm us...a place where we are safe and secure.

We are told that we will never hunger or thirst again, ever. That we will be completely satisfied, body, mind, spirit and emotion. We will not hunger for a human touch, for acceptance or compassion and caring...we not thirst for glory or recognition or reward. We will be completely full and satisfied...

And the sun will not beat down upon them. Again, this is a desert country, where much of the year the temperature is 110 or even 120! HOT. And there was no air conditioning then...now John might say we are kept cool and comfortable.

The Lamb at the center of the throne...Jesus is the Lamb of God, and abides at the center of the throne of God. God and Jesus are one...both the Lamb and God are seen as being in the center of the great throne of heaven...

Jesus, the lamb, will be our shepherd. Jesus called himself the good shepherd, who gives up his life for the sheep (John 10). He said as the good shepherd, he would give us eternal life, and no one would snatch us from his hand. No wolf or bear or lion or thief would come to us...we are safe and secure in his strength.

He will be our shepherd and lead us to living waters...waters that refresh and renew us...that provide a place to peace.

This part of the passage reminds us of the 23rd Psalm...the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...he leadeth me to green pastures and besides still waters.

Jesus promised that within us would spring up rivers of living water welling up to eternal life. The shepherd will bring us to the living waters in heaven, the great desert oasis, where we have plenty and live in comfort and peace and fulfillment.

And finally, the image of tenderness....

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Like a tender mother or caring father, God himself will wipe the tears from our eyes. All the suffering and grief of this life have passed away...and God himself is with us and cares for us. This passage is echoed in another window into heaven in Revelations 21, where it says that "God himself will live among them and he will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain of any kind, for the former things have passed away. And he who sits upon the throne said, "behold, I make all things new".

THIS IS OUR FAITH, OUR HOPE, OUR GLORY. Into this we commend our loved ones. We still grieve, as is human. But our grief is tempered by our faith...which proclaims the grace of God in Jesus Christ to wash away all our sins and make us new...which professes belief in a good shepherd who lays down his life for us, his sheep...who will lead us to green pastures and living waters...where we will never thirst or hunger again...and God comforts us with the tenderness of a loving mother and caring father.

This is our hope...