

“Good Grief”
April 10, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, “Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.” As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day.

You would have thought that Jacob would have respected his wife’s dying words and kept the name she gave their son: Ben-oni

But no, Jacob changes it. And wisely so. Ben-oni would have been a curse around his neck for all his life, a painful label. For Ben-oni means son of my sorrow, son of my misfortune. Which he was to Rachel, dying in childbirth.

Jacob gave his last boy a more optimistic and propitious name: Ben-jamin. Son of my fortune. Not that there was anything fortunate in Rachel’s death, but she gave him a young son to count on when he grew old and worn out.

Paul writes about a son we can count on when we too are worn out. Listen, as we pick up midway through:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Except, it does sting.

Except, death seems pretty victorious at times. As I am prone to saying at funerals: Christ may have defeated death but not the dying.

What does make for a useful funeral?

When I visited my parents the other week, my mother mentioned she is leaving strict specific instructions about what she wants. Which hymns. Which Bible texts I will read. I will read? Yes, she said. I will run the service. King James Version only. And no eulogy. Nobody talking about her.

Whether or not we will comply with her instructions is another matter. Not as if she's going to notice, or care.

What makes for a useful funeral?

What isn't useful is when you try to explain or justify the loss, the death -- sometimes silence alone makes the most sense.

Markers (as with Rachel) can be useful. They give a place to go to and connect with those who aren't here anymore. I'm keen on markers: whether across the street, tombstones, luminaries at relay for life, name in bronze over at the Memorial Garden. Something important happened, once. Remember it. For who among us will really be more than a curiosity beyond the second generation after our death?

Whether plaques, luminaries, or tombstones, they say to others: don't forget me, I existed. I was here.

What about the eulogy? Some can be very moving. Some can be downright painful. We clergy-types also run into the issue about how honest should you be about someone. What if they didn't leave behind a whole lot to talk about that is laudable?

A rabbi once explained the Jewish practice about truth telling at funerals. He wrote, One may not speak ill of the dead not because the lifeless person was perfect when alive but because he or she cannot respond. ... It is not the purpose of a eulogy for humans who are themselves imperfect to stand before others ... and talk negatively about or render judgment upon that person. That is the task of God."

That advice is useful.

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What are useful, practical hints for those we will leave behind?

- ➔ Can your loved ones get into your safe deposit box?
- ➔ Is your will clear?
- ➔ You can bet doing the taxes will be a nightmare.
- ➔ You can also bet coming back to church alone will be difficult unless a friend invites you to sit with them

- ➔ Is there anything secreted away that would harm your reputation should it be discovered, which, if you're dead, it will
- ➔ Figure out how she will get the lawn mowed, the snow removed, or how she will reach those items on the top shelf
- ➔ How about your cars and other possessions? Are they jointly owned?
- ➔ Let's not forget about your passwords on your computer. That happened to someone here. Husband died. He had changed the passwords. Widow couldn't get into the computer and access all the information. Since then, whenever I take off for a mission trip, I make sure Elaine knows all my passwords.

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Death and taxes, both painful. Deadly dodge ball and all the big guys stand on the line grinning viciously at you. No dodging it..

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain
-- T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"*

We will grieve. If we aren't the ones grieving, we're the ones dead.

From the cradle to the crypt our lives are saturated with grief.

From the cradle to the crypt, we suffer losses of many kinds and causes: getting laid off, retirement, moving to a new town, getting sick, you lose vitality and those tennis days are long gone, children move far away, the divorce grinds to its inevitable conclusion, death of pet, friend, parent, sibling, spouse, grandchild, child. The intensity of the loss increases the intensity of the grief.

Life must be something more than a burden to be endured, more than something for which amusement is the only antidote.

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The incredulity of loss intrigues me. The hardest moments are the weirdest such as when I escort the family as they walk out of the hospital, numb from realizing you don't have to return. Or leaving a job where you worked for the last time. Did it really happen?

Don't be surprised either by the resentment and blame that builds up and often gets expressed sideways, like when you squish a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

We avoid comparing those formal stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance – to a 'to-do list,' some checklist, or a series of hurdles you jump. You're no horse running the steeplechase.

Grief is more a sad dance – sometimes a minuet, sometimes a twist, sometimes two steps forward, one step back, and a few clumsy hops sideways too, other times standing perfectly still and numb in the middle of the dance floor while everyone else is dancing.

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Grief also is something intensely intimate and private. We intrude. C. S. Lewis surprised the world when he reluctantly published his very personal jots and scribbles in his diary about how he felt after the death of his wife.

Lewis is the one who discovered how “bereavement is a phase of marriage as the honeymoon.” To which one of our clever members, you may recall, quipped, “Yeah, but not as much fun.”

If married, one of you will die and leave behind the other. “All loves are torn apart,” he observed from inside the tear.

What does grief feel like?

Lewis answers:

- no one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear
- I shall never again be a biped
- God slammed door in my face
- starboard engine gone
- apathy and flatness
- body like an empty house
- no more roads, only cul de sacs

He also discovered a crude selfishness in grief:

- the way to realize your house is a house of cards is to knock it down
- the mind turns the reality into a maudlin misrepresentation
- we use God to assuage our hurt, but God can't be used as the road to “the reunion in heaven” but as the END
- do you mourn what you have lost, or what she has lost?
- passionate grief cuts us off from the dead
- when you mourn least, you remember best

“then she turned back to the Eternal Fountain...”
-- Dante, “Paradise”

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Time and time again, I hear from those who are grieving – whether because of death, job-loss, illness, change – that they are surprised by the ones who step into their lives and care for them, and how often they are disappointed by the ones they thought would help but don't.

What helps when you grieve?

- ➔ Hugs
- ➔ The chance to talk about it, to name it
- ➔ People who remember to name the name of the person you mourn
- ➔ People who understand how “the lonely become untidy,” even lazy, apathetic – for there’s nothing to live for, nobody to wake up for, food tastes like dust, wine like cinders
- ➔ Friends who sense how your instincts are to hide and withdrawal, they sense your embarrassment or how you especially want to avoid those who feel the need to wash out their emotions, even guilt, all over you
- ➔ Friends who protect you because, as it is said, “common sense vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.” You really don’t think clearly, shock makes you vulnerable to suggestions and hasty decisions.
- ➔ Friends who help you pack up your husband’s clothes for the rummage sale.
- ➔ When you realize sorrow is not a “state but a process”

Good grief. I guess I’m still trying to figure out what is good about it. I only know that it must be faced and I can’t face it alone.