

GOOD GRIEF: HOW TO GRIEVE WELL (John 11:32-44)

This week I dug through one of two file cabinets I have in my garage. I pulled out a binder about 4-inches thick, which contained the papers and assignments related for a preaching seminar I took when I did the coursework for my doctorate from Midwestern Seminary. I found a paper I had written. It was dated May 20, 1996. In just a few weeks, that paper will be 27-years old, just a few years younger than I was when I wrote it. I am going to use the opening of that paper as the introduction to this message, well, a portion of the opening. The title of the paper was, “Preaching and Pain: The Pastor’s Dilemma and Duty.”

As I stand behind the pulpit this coming Sunday morning, I will make eye contact with many who are experiencing various kinds and degrees of pain but pain nonetheless. (I then quickly rehearsed the stories of about 7 to 8 people and the kind of pain they faced).

The fact is, behind each pair of eyes there is some kind of pain. For some, the pain is fresh and exceedingly sharp. For others, their pain has been dulled by time, but it is subject to a reawakening given the right circumstances . . . Vernon Davis, the former dean of Midwestern Baptist Seminary told the story of an incident that took place early in his ministry. Upon arriving at a new church, Davis visited one of the dear, elderly saints of the congregation. During the course of their conversation, she urged him, “Brother Davis, when you preach to us on a Sunday morning, we’ll all be wearing nice clothes and a big smile. But don’t let that fool you. Just remember that under every heart is a little pail of tears.” Such is true of every attendee of every church.

It is the task of the pastor to address each heart compassionately and helpfully while applying the balm of God’s word to each wound represented in the congregation. That is a tall order. What complicates matters is that the preacher himself is not immune to pain and hurt . . . Preaching professor Haddon Robinson voices the sincere questions many preachers have: “How do you preach when you don’t feel like it—when you’re distracted, unable to focus, when your family is in turmoil or your health is failing or detractors in the church are launching artillery rounds in your direction, when you’re going through loneliness or feelings of failure?” Pain is inextricably linked to the preaching event. If the preacher is to be faithful to his God-ordained charge, he *must* preach *to* pain, and because he shares the frailty of human flesh, he *may*, very well, have to preach *from* pain. Pain poses for the preacher a duty to work at and a dilemma to work through.

In the paper, I explored both the dilemma and the duty.

This morning, we continue our quick journey through John’s gospel. We are drawing just one message from each chapter. We come to John 11. In this dramatic chapter, Jesus raises His friend Lazarus from the grave. Before He does so, He speaks to the sisters of Lazarus—Martha and Mary.

Mary serves as an interesting study. She shows up three times in the NT, and each time we encounter Mary, we find her at the feet of Jesus. In Luke 10, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him teach while her sister Martha is busily at work in the kitchen preparing a meal for Jesus and His twelve disciples. While Martha is working, Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, growing her faith.

In John 12, which we will come to next week, we find Mary kneeling at the feet of Jesus as she anoints Him with expensive perfume and dries His feet with her hair. She is kneeling at Jesus' feet, giving her best.

Today, we will look at John 11 where we discover Mary falling at the feet of Jesus when He shows up four days after the death and burial of her brother Lazarus. Mary falls at Jesus' feet, grieving her loss.

At the feet of Jesus is a great place to grow, to give, and to grieve.

On the surface, it seems that Lazarus' illness and subsequent death was a bad thing, but Jesus had a vantage point that no other had. Jesus knew that God was working behind the scenes for His glory and the good of His people. That is why Jesus was able to say that Lazarus' sickness and death was meant "for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4).

You and I, however, don't possess the knowledge the Lord does. We don't understand how He is able to take the bad and bring good from them. We don't understand why things happen as they do. And even if we did, that wouldn't keep us from grieving over significant losses. We are human; God has given us human emotions. Grief is a natural, human response to loss.

Some mistakenly think that Christians shouldn't grieve when their loved ones pass away. I completely disagree. The Bible does not teach that. Some people misquote the Bible. They cite 1 Thessalonians 4:13 which says, "grieve not." They do not quote the full verse that tells us we are to grieve not like those who have no hope. We are to grieve, but our grief is to be tempered by the knowledge of the hope we have in Christ. Solomon taught in Ecclesiastes 3:4 that there is a time to weep and a time to laugh. There is a time for grieving. We just need to know when to grieve and how to do it.

"When are we to grieve?" is a question that is easily answered. Grief is a natural response to loss. When you lose something or someone that is dear to you, it is time to grieve. We experience all kinds of losses that lead to grief. The most common and most powerful loss that brings grief is the loss of a loved one: a spouse, a child, a parent or grandparent, a sibling, a friend, or anyone that is especially dear to you.

We can lose people in ways other than death. You can lose a spouse through divorce. You can lose a child through marriage; he or she gets married and moves away. Or you can lose a child through school or work; your child moves off to college or moves away to a new job.

A broken engagement is a loss. Breaking up with a boyfriend or a girlfriend is a loss. When you lose your health, you experience a dramatic loss. If you were to lose your job as a result of downsizing, replacement, or even retirement, you would be a candidate for grief. When you lose a longtime pet, it is natural to grieve. Whenever you lose someone or something that is dear to you, you must give yourself permission to grieve.

The next question is, "How can we grieve?" I believe Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, can help us answer that question. As we examine John 11:32-44 we can find

several clues as to how we can grieve well.

We Grieve Well When We Express Our Grief at the Feet of Jesus

Mark Twain said something with which I fully agree. Mr. Twain said, “Life is just one darn thing after another.” Have you found that to be true? About the time you think you are making some financial headway, something breaks down, and you must repair it or replace it. Just as one family member who was sick gets better, another one falls ill. Life **is** just one darn thing after another. Some of those things, however, are serious enough that before long, we find we are gripped by grief; we are seized by sorrow; we are held by heartache. What are we to do when that is the case?

At those times, we are to express our grief at the feet of Jesus. That is what Mary did (v. 32). It doesn’t do any good to deny our emotions, or to suppress our feelings, or to just keep a stiff upper lip and hold them in. In fact, that approach is far more hurtful than helpful. We need to let those emotions out, and there is no better person to whom we can express them than Jesus Himself. You see, the Lord is not intimidated by our emotions. He is quite big enough to handle them. After all, He created the human heart with all its emotions. We need to understand that emotions in and of themselves are not sinful. It is not sinful to feel anger or to feel guilt. Emotions, however, can lead to sinful behavior if we allow those emotions to turn our actions in the wrong direction. The best way to keep emotions from controlling us is to vent them and express them.

During times of grief and loss, there are a myriad of emotions we which feel. We need to give ourself permission to feel those emotions and to express them to the Lord. What might you feel during periods of grief? Let me name a few common feelings to see if you have or if you presently connect with any of these . . . *deprived, robbed, isolated, frightened, despondent, gloomy, sorrowful, guilty, resentful, panicky, helpless, hopeless, numb, weak, empty*. Whatever you are feeling, I want you to know, it is okay to feel what you feel. It is also okay to express what you feel. It is not only okay, it is necessary. We are not going to make any headway in moving through our grief unless we own up to it and acknowledge it.

In his classic little book entitled, *Good Grief*, Granger Westberg points out that, for the most part, society has taught boys not to cry. When a preschool boy falls down and hurts himself, we are tempted to say, “Now, now, be a little man, and don’t cry.” Thus, when he is eight years old and skins his knee, he won’t cry. When he is 18 years old and loses a grandparent, he chooses not to cry. Then, when he is 38 years old, or 48, or 58 and loses a parent, he can’t cry.

We need to embrace our grief, acknowledge it, and express it instead of pretending that it is not there.

Consider the following piece written by Terry Kettering. It is called, “The Elephant in the Room.” It talks about the need to let those who are grieving talk about their grief and those whom they have lost. Listen carefully.

There’s an elephant in the room. It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it. Yet we squeeze by with “How are you?” and “I’m fine.” And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter. We talk about the weather. We talk about work. We

talk about everything else—except the elephant in the room. There’s an elephant in the room. We all know it is there. We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together. It is constantly on our minds. For, you see, it is a very big elephant. It has hurt us all. But we do not talk about the elephant in the room. Oh, please, say her name. Oh, please, say “Barbara” again. Oh, please, let’s talk about the elephant in the room. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Can I say “Barbara” to you and not have you look away? For if I cannot, then you are leaving me alone . . . in a room . . . with an elephant.

Don’t be silent about the elephant. Don’t hide your grief. Express it. Tell it to others, and tell it to Jesus.

We Grieve Well When We Entrust Our Grief to the Heart of Jesus

What did Jesus do when Mary bore her heart to Him? Look at vv. 33-35. One writer translated v. 35 as, “Jesus burst into tears.” Jesus’ eyes didn’t just get a little moist. He was moved to tears. Salty tears ran down the face of our Savior.

You and I wouldn’t dare grieve in the presence of one who would ridicule us for our grief. Fortunately, we never have to fear Jesus doing that. Jesus understands. He has been where we are. The OT prophesies of the Messiah describe Him as, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Jesus is no stranger to grief. He understands our grief and is willing to grieve with us.

In 1983, ten days after his son passed away in a tragic car accident, William Sloane Coffin, the pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC, stepped to the pulpit of that historic church and said:

On an early January night, while driving in a terrible storm, my son Alexander—who to his friends was a real day-brightener, and to his family “fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky”—my 24-year-old Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.

In his message, Rev. Coffin relates how that after the accident, a lady came by the home to deliver some food. On her way to the kitchen, the lady shook her head and said, “I just don’t understand the will of God.” Coffin confessed:

Instantly, I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. “I’ll say you don’t lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm . . . Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guardrail separating the road and Boston Harbor?”

Nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with His finger on triggers, His fist around knives, His hands on steering wheels. God is against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness.

He went on to say, “My consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s was the first of all our hearts to break.”

Jesus’ heart broke when Lazarus died, and I believe His heart broke when your loved one died. For that very reason, you can entrust your grief to the heart of Jesus. You can lay your care upon Him because He really does care for you.

A well-known author/lecturer was asked to serve as a judge in a contest that sought to find the most caring child. The winner was deemed to be a 4-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly man who had recently lost his wife of many years. One day the child saw the man crying; so, he went up to the old man and climbed into his lap and just sat there. When he came home and told his mother what he did, his mother asked him what he said to the old man. The boy answered, “Nothing, I just helped him cry.”

If you will entrust your grief to the heart of Jesus, He will reverse the rolls. He will invite you into His lap, and He will help you cry.

How are we to grieve? We are to express our grief at the feet of Jesus. We are to entrust our grief to the heart of Jesus. There is a third thing to do . . .

We Grieve Well When We Replace Our Grief by the Word of Jesus

The first verse of the hymn, “The Great Physician,” says, “The great Physician now is near, the sympathizing Jesus; He speaks the drooping heart to cheer, oh! hear the voice of Jesus.” Jesus’ voice is exactly what we need to hear during times of grief.

It was Jesus’ voice that Mary **and** Martha both heard. **Jesus made a short journey** to the cemetery where Lazarus was entombed. **He prayed a quick prayer. He issued a brief but loud command.** At that moment, Lazarus came back to life, and the grief of all who were there turned to shock and awe, and then, to joy.

The Lord’s word has a way of bringing joy back into our lives. It may not happen as dramatically nor as quickly as it did in the case of Mary and Martha, but it can happen as surely in your life. Let God’s word minister to you in times of grief. It is His word that we need to hear.

When we get a word from God, we are able to move forward.

William Sloane Coffin, in that message to his church after his son’s death, mentioned some of the biblical passages that ministered to his heart.

- “Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall strengthen thee.”
- “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”
- “Lord, by Thy favor Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong.”
- “For Thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.”
- “In this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”
- “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Let God’s word minister to your heart and soul during those times of grief. It is by His word that we will replace our grief with a shout of joy. We read in 1 Corinthians 15:55,

“O death, where is your victory sting? O grave, where is your sting?” John declared, “And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4b).

Place your faith in the Lord and in His word.

She was known by everyone as simply Aunt Martie. Aunt Martie was one of those individuals who spread faith, hope, and love wherever she went. One day she telephoned her pastor, Brother Jim. She said, “Preacher, could you stop by this afternoon? I need to talk with you.”

That afternoon, Bro. Jim dropped by. As the two talked, Aunt Martie explained that she had been to the doctor and learned she had a cancerous tumor. “He says I probably have six months to live,” Aunt Martie announced.

Bro. Jim was about to offer his sympathy when Aunt Martie cut him off, “The Lord has been good. I have lived a long time. I’m ready to go. You know that.” Aunt Martie continued, “I want to talk about my funeral. I have been thinking about it, and there are things I know I want.”

Aunt Martie and her pastor discussed her favorite hymns and passages of Scripture that were especially meaningful to her. When they had covered just about everything, Aunt Martie said, “One more thing, preacher. When they bury me, I want my old Bible in one hand and a fork in the other.”

“A fork?” Bro. Jim questioned with surprise. “Why do you want to be buried with a fork?”

Aunt Martie explained:

I have been thinking about all the church dinners and banquets that I attended through the years. One thing sticks in my mind. At those really, nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server or maybe the hostess would come by to collect the dirty dishes. I can hear the words now. Sometimes, at the best ones, somebody would lean over my shoulder and whisper, “You can keep your fork.” And do you know what that meant? Dessert was coming! It didn’t mean a cup of Jell-O or pudding or even a dish of ice cream. You don’t need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep my fork, I knew the best was yet to come!

That’s exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice. But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and say, “Why the fork?” That’s what I want you to say. I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because the best is yet to come.

Brothers and sisters, as long as we are in this life, we are going to experience grief; we are going to suffer losses that tear at our hearts. But in the very midst of our grief, we can approach the Lord, express our grief to Him, entrust our grief to Him, and let Him replace our grief through His mighty word. **His word reminds us that the best is yet to come** for those who belong to Him. Do you belong to Him?