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**“Good Grief”**

  *Let us pray -- Creator God, Holy mystery who is in us and with us and beside us -- be with us this morning as we journey forward into the unknown. Help us to be open to you as well as to each other in this time of transition. May be open to conversations, conversations of grief with one another and with you, a God who is still speaking. Amen*.

    Grief. Grief is not a four-letter word, but sometimes we treat it that way. We do not want to speak of it, nor acknowledge that it is happening in our lives. What is grief? It is our response to loss.

I am not an expert on grief; however, I am a student -- a most recent student. It is part of life. We all have grieved, are in grief, or will grieve in the future.

    Today is the third Sunday after Easter, but please let me take you back to the Easter story.  We like to jump to Easter day because that is when it is all nice and lovely, but let’s go back to the crucifixion, or more importantly let’s go back to the day after.  Imagine the grief of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the other Mary, and the disciples. We know the story that there is resurrection, but they did not. They had just witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion and death – just imagine their grief. (pausing for reflection)

    We need to talk about grief today. I will use own experience of heavy grief of the past 16 months to engage in the conversation of grief. I will speak about three things today:

1. Task model of grief
2. My experience of grief
3. Our communal experience of grief

Do you remember Kubler-Ross and the five stages of grief? Can anyone name them?  They are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Although this is an excellent model, I will speak to another model, the Task Model of grief.

Task Model- (from J. William Worden in Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy)

    The way we engage in the process is by completing four tasks of grief. The experience of grief is universal. Everyone will experience loss in his or her lives. Mourning is the process of grief or the process in which we adjust to the loss in our lives. The task model of mourning implies that the process is not passive or something that only time will cure. The task model implies that the mourner can and needs to take action to work through the process of mourning.

    Task I: To accept the reality of the loss.
    Task II:  To process the pain of grief.
    Task III: To adjust to a world without the deceased [or to adjust     to a world in which the loss is accepted].
    Task IV: To find an enduring connection with the deceased [or     loss] in the     midst of embarking on a new life.

The tasks are somewhat sequential, but we may go from 1 to 2, back to 1, to 3 to 1, to 4, to 3 to 1 etc. (Note: I demonstrated by walking forward and backward to show how one might move through the tasks) Grief is a process. Everyone mourns differently and in a different time frame.

My experience of grief
      **Task I: To accept the reality of the loss.**
    I had to come “full face with the reality that the person [in my case, my marriage] is dead, that the person [or my marriage] is gone and will not return” (Worden 39). I let go; I surrendered -- to the fact that the death of my marriage had occurred. As I surrendered to the loss, grace came in and I lost the fear of ending my marriage. I was reminded of the assurances of God in Matthew 28:20 (NIV)“… And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”. As grace came in I was reminded that grace was the sign of God’s presence in my life. I was not alone in my mourning.

    **Task II:  To process the pain of grief.**
    “Find a way to feel the pain and release the anger, in an appropriate way”, Susan, my mentor and spiritual advisor, counseled. I did something very “un-yogic”. I rolled up my yoga mat and then I yelled, I screamed, I pounded the bed, and the chair. I put on boxing gloves and punched the daylights out of the padded instructor in front of me. I released my pain, surrendered to my pain. Ultimately, I let go of my pain and created space for grace to come in.
    As my friend Molly said, “The only way through this is through it”.  Had I avoided the second task of mourning, I would have become numb and shut down all my feelings (Worden 44). And according to Worden, if I avoided the pain of grief, I might be destined to carry the pain throughout my life (45). As I let go into the pain and the anger of my loss I began to see the gift in it. I began to recognize that my pain was so intense because I had loved so deeply. I was capable of deep love and that recognition was a gift of grace.

**Task III:  To adjust to a world without the deceased [or to adjust to a world in which the loss is accepted].**
    As I let go and embraced my new reality, I began to witness a greater sense of peace in the house. My home began feeling different; it began to feel more spacious and less conflicted. I was beginning to see the answers to prayer that I might find peace, love, respect and unity in my family -- except that my family was no longer a family of four, but a family of three.

**Task IV: To find an enduring connection with the deceased [or loss] in the midst of embarking on a new life.**
    Sixteen months into my mourning, I am forgetting my grief and the torment of my crisis. I am seeing that there is a path forward for my life and there is a path forward for his. I have recognized that I will always have a relationship with my former husband, primarily because of the kids, but I also recognize that I will have a relationship with him because he was such a beautiful part of my life for so many years. If I am to integrate my life, (which I must do) I must embrace all of it and my marriage to him was a significant portion of my adult life. I loved him deeply and felt loved deeply in return. I felt very loved and for that, I am incredibly thankful. I recognize that I have the capacity to love deeply and that is a gift of grace to me. I am becoming open to new possibilities as a single mother and woman.

**Communal Experience of Grief**

    I have not walked this journey alone-- far from it. Friends, spiritual directors, therapists, pastoral caregivers, professors, my pastor and my congregation have walked with me. As Jeroid Roussell, Jr describes in his book, Dealing with Grief: Theirs and Ours, the work of spiritual caregivers is to “walk with people helping [to] integrate their life journey with its knowns and unknowns” (45). My many caregivers have helped me to “let go” in and into each task of mourning. I have experienced their presence, the presence of the Divine and the “reality of grace” (Roussell 45) working in my life. And I have come to recognize that I am ready to embark on a new life.

    Community and compassion go together. According to research on group connection by Jacoba Lilius, Monica Worline, Jane Dutton, Jason Kanov, and Sally Maitlis presented in "Understanding Compassion Capability", in a highly connected community there is direct correlation between connection and the capacity to show compassion towards one another. In this study, the researchers found that “by facilitating the spread of knowledge about the personal struggles of others, the dynamic boundary-permeability norm allows unit members to know who might be a particular source of insight or comfort. Because members are able to seek out and share their suffering with those who can take their perspective, the norm encourages collective empathic concern”(890). In other words, when a group such as a church community shares one another’s struggles, they can identify who and how best someone might provide help.

    Their study also identified that the quality of connections and how one engages in every day relationship cultivates “a collective compassion capability” (887). They found that when an organization commits to deep connection, such as in my church, “suffering can be surfaced, attended to and healed” (893). Deeply connected, radical community provides the support in which one can find the help one needs in a journey towards healing.

    Bethel is full of compassion. The way we connect with one another allows for huge compassion capability. (EXAMPLES of individuals that helped me followed)

**Summary - Experiencing the Divine**

    Mourning is a very personal journey but a journey best walked in the community of others. Everyone suffers and as we surrender into grief, grace enters and healing does occur. Linda Ross Swanson in her work in Hospice care has found, “It is in our suffering that we find grace and deepen our experience of the Divine” (179). Grief opens the opportunity for Divine experience and when others are involved in the experience, it can be ever more meaningful.

Where is the good in grief? The good news is there is resurrection. We have to walk though our grief to experience it. Remember the Easter story? There is resurrection.

Remember, this community-- Bethel Church, my Tribe, has HUGE compassion capability and we will walk through our grief (loss of our pastor, or other losses in our congregation) because we have one another. And there will be resurrection.

Time for communal response to the reflection. What is your experience of grief? Lets talk about it. If it is too difficult to talk about your experience of grief, then simply say the words “me, too”. (Discussion followed)

**Bibliography**

Lilius, Jacoba, Monica Worline, Jane Dutton, Jason Kanov, and Sally Maitlis.     "Understanding Compassion Capability". *Human Relations. 64.7 (2011): 873-   899*. Print. Researchers detailed a theory of compassion through the “foundations of a collective capability for compassion through a detailed analysis of everyday practices in an organizational unit.” The study found that high quality connections and “norm of dynamic boundary permeability” enabled the employees of a company to respond to members suffering. The practices of “acknowledging, addressing problems directly, bounded playing, celebrating, collective decision making, help-offering and orienting foster high quality connections by directing unit members to interact in ways that increase mutuality, positive regard and tensility” and led to healing and higher compassion capability. The study focuses on how everyday practices cultivate collective compassion. Relationship quality and shared understandings of the exchange of personal information allowed for “engagement with each other’s pain, sharing of feelings and adaptive responding” that directly affected the unit’s capabilities. This study can be used as a reference in understanding why and how healthy church organizations may help members in dealing with life’s suffering in a holistic, healing way. The study was collaboration among university professors and research fellows at Queen’s University, UC Irvine, University of Michigan, Western Washington University, and University of British Columbia.

Swanson, Linda Ross. “Hospice Vignettes: The vast territory of a dying man” *Healing     Ministry , volume 10, Number 4, Fall 2003. Ppp. 177-180*. Print. Linda Ross Swanson was a Chaplin intern with the Legacy Visiting Nurses Association Hospice, Portland Oregon at the time this article was published. She is Marylhurst University graduate and this manuscript was first presented as a paper for a course on pastoral and spiritual care. This article is part of an actual Hospice case with a man dealing with the end of his life. Swanson explores the themes of transformation, resurrection and grace. Swanson explains how short interactions with the dying are powerful, transformational and full of grace. Those who are dying have much to tell us about living, according to Swanson. In addition, Swanson offers an example of the power of an ethical will.

Roussell, Jr., Jeroid. D*ealing with Grief, Theirs and Ours. Staten Island, NY: Society of  St. Paul, Alba House Publisher, 1999*. Print. Dr. Roussell is currently the Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Marylhurst University. The book addresses grief and loss from a caregiver and care receiver perspective. He looks at grief from a (w)holistic perspective including normal and abnormal grief. Roussell draws on his theology of incarnation, cross/suffering, and hope/resurrection as the basis of his ministry of care. The way that Roussell addresses grief provides for hope, healing and a way forward to personal transformation. The book provided me a framework to review my personal grief and work through my grief in a live giving, transformative way. Thank you.