

“WHAT I’VE LEARNED ABOUT GRIEF”

TEXT: “I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you.” John 14:18

If you have a favorite chapter of the Bible and it is not John 14, the burden of proof will fall heavily upon you, especially when it comes to the dark and dreary moments of the time the Lord God gives us to live upon the earth. Other chapters of the Bible are superb and sure, but this one - John 14 brings it all together. Knowing that His hour had come, our Lord moves to the monumental things which concerned life and death; friendship then the Kingdom, and finally the world. Our Lord is troubled Himself in it; His own fear of death, while finally conquered, is there. The betrayal of Judas Iscariot is there. And Simon Peter says, as Chapter 13 begins, that he is ready to follow all his days; and Jesus says, “Before the night is over, you will have denied me three times.” Jesus was having a difficult time Himself.

Then, Each verse follows as a sermon unto itself, cascading down the highest mountaintop of all the world, best of which is the promise guaranteed time and time again that, while Christ is about to leave the earth, still the world belongs to Him, still it is redeemed in Him, still He lingers in the presence of the Holy Spirit “whom the Father will send in my name...Meanwhile, let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” Then our text for this sermon, John 14:18:

“I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you.”

Now my friend, catch the grandeur of those words. Take them with you as you go. Take them to your neighbors and your kinfolk far away. Take them to your deepest doubts and highest hopes. Take them with you when you wonder why on earth the world is such that human hearts can ache and break and fly to pieces in a moment unsure and terribly unwanted. Whisper them when you stand bewildered before the news you never thought you’d have to hear.

These words belong to you, however strong and old and powerful you are, or seem to be at least, to other people in the world. The Lord God knows your fame. He knows how frail you really are. Other comforts may desert you, other kingdoms rise and fall. Other promises are broken. So, in whatever discomfort you might be, my friend, today or any day; years ago or years to come; decades even ...In either case, listen to the words; “I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to meet you.”

It is as if you were a little child, alone in the darkness of the night: “I’m afraid, Mom,” the little girl was saying, “I don’t want to be there in my room alone.” “Why?” “Because I’m scared there by myself,” she said, “that’s why.” I mean, the parent being there beside you on the bed does not change a thing. Whatever evil lurked behind the shadows, or the things that go “bump” in the night, were there. Having a parent there beside you does not change a thing, you know, except you know, of course, it does. We all can

stand the darkness if someone is there beside us: “Just come over for a minute, then I’ll be okay. And you can smile until you cry, for it’s so tender but so strong and final too.

To be alone is the danger that lurks around every corner, the other name of every problem in your life, Like Solzhenitsyn told us in his Gulag Archipelago: “They didn’t have to torture us in the Russian prison camp, not the most of us... All they had to do was lock us in a dark and empty room alone...And, on being released, we told them everything we knew, so terrified of being alone in the darkness... And the happiest day of all my life,” he said, “was the day they put me in a prison cell with other people.” Something deep within us is damaged when we are alone, and it is worse when it comes to grief.

So Jesus said, “You will never be alone. I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you. Just when you cannot take another moment, look up... I will be there.”

The word which Jesus used is translated with different words: “I will not leave you desolate,” the Revised Standard Version reads. “I will not abandon you.” the Living Bible says. The Good News for Modern Man has it simply: “When I go, you will not be left alone.” But my favorite is this King James original translation: “I will not leave you comfortless, I will comfort you”; one of the softest and most reassuring words in all the language; I will comfort you. Absorb that word with me, my friends. Literally it comes from Greek orphanos which means, as you will catch the transliteration, “I will not leave you as orphans, “The Living Bible adds, “I will not leave you as orphans in the storm”.

The classical Greek is broader, Funnily enough, when Plato was relating the feelings of the disciples after Socrates was executed, he wrote that they were orphanos, like orphans: helpless, comfortless, abandoned... The first thing I have learned about grief is that it is impossible to take alone. One single soul and psyche cannot absorb it all. And if you think you are doing a favor by not bothering the one agrieved, forget it. Go and do not leave another comfortless... That is Christ’s promise.

The second thing I want to say is that the road through grief is a terribly individual journey. People make me mad selling books on the patterns of our behavior of how to approach a terminal illness and death, of how we approach grief, of what happens in our passages; and I, too, am amused by them and notice some similarities myself. But the major thing I know is that you must walk this lonesome valley by yourself. Others can help, of course, and point the way, and some are similar. But there is no way to tell another how to journey through grief. And I resent the attempts to do it...

It is a way of saying that I've learned that there is not right way to do it.. And there is no wrong way, either; except to try to avoid it. I've come through the years to learn how futile it almost always is to try to change the grieving nature of the person. People tend to face grief the way they tend to face everything else; every other experience of emotional import, that is. And while it might oversimplify it, and it could even frighten you, the quiet person tends to be more quiet, the verbal more talkative, the trusting more trusting, the depressed more depressed... I say "tendency" in all these things, for we both know exceptions. And I've come over the decades now to believe that whatever is, is normal - and that to try to alter normalcy, to try to reshape it into something that would be more agreeable to you, the outsider; to pretend that everyone needs to declare the same majestic note of faith and triumph and emphasize the victory of Jesus Christ in the same majestic way is naively irreligious, and violates the Scripture.

And, I often hear people telling other people how to grieve. I see people panicking because someone close to them experiencing grief acts out of character; either cries too much or doesn't cry at all, either feels too guilty or not guilty enough, either sleeps too easily or doesn't sleep at all... either/or - You know what I mean: As if there were some way, and only one some way, to do it. Our inability to accept an individual person's right to individual grief hints in other weaknesses in us, in that we often find it difficult, if not impossible, to allow another person to be another person, whether it is our child or parent, our employee or boss, or neighbor, fellow student or teacher. We want everyone to be the way we are and to be nice to us and to make it easier for us to live and move and have our being - You know what I mean. So , when it comes to grief, because we have handled grief, or haven't - either buried it or passed it on - we would just as soon not be bothered by the apparent strength or weaknesses of others.

Now this whole point is a massive volume in itself, and I dare not run too quickly; but for our purposes today, it is a small portion in this reservoir of what I think I know. But get it one more time: When it comes to grief, as other things, there is no right way to accomplish it, to defeat it...and whatever is, is normal. For if you dare to interrupt the process of grief by insisting to yourself and to others that you or they should be one way or the other, you and they will pay a terrible price. Tears are no insult to God or man. To be afraid in the middle of the night is the beginning step to reaching out for help.

That's second; Don't look for a pattern; be open to the other person's right to grieve. It is not manly not to cry.. It is not grown up... It is not sin to question God...

The next thing I have learned about grief is that it is a most monumental force that does not easily go away. The world is never the same again after someone you love has died. It often lasts for years.... One of my favorite of the Charles Dickens' stories is the

touching scene at the cemetery where an elderly woman is standing by the grave - tears streaming down her cheeks - of a man who had died at the age twenty-five, fifty years before. A passerby came up to comfort her and , noticing the young age of the deceased and all the years since then, said to her: "I am sorry, dear. Was that your son?" "No," she sobbed, but somewhat irritated, "it was my husband"... And a thousand years pass as a watch in the night.

You know the myriads of famous stories like the one of GreyFriar's Bobby, the statue in front of GreyFriar Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, of a little dog. For twelve straight years, Bobby went back there to the church where now the memorial bears his form, waiting for his master to return to the bus stop out front. Time is not what it seems when it comes to grief. I have seen real live painful tears at five and ten, twenty, even thirty, years; watched people grieve on anniversaries and birthdays. "Our New Year's Eve has never been the same since 1942, when those two uniformed soldiers came to bring the awful news. The New Year's Eves are all the same since then."

And more, this strange force called grief can come in strange and impromptu ways, often in little things when, the Bible says in the Song of Solomon, "Lord, save us from the little foxes," We can protect ourselves from the beasts of the field by keeping watch and building shelters here and there, and fortresses to keep out the great enormous pressure of it all; but now and then, as the farmer knew it, a fence around his little garden, tossed up in haste perhaps, but the little foxes dug right under, and when he least expected it, stole away his produce. The little foxes steal away your happy moments, too, I know. And tears can come without a warning.

This strange and awful force called grief can work its way in around the edges in most peculiar ways. "What's wrong with you?" the Grandma asked of the little guy just seven years of age. "What's wrong with you?" I could have told her: The little boy was grieving, in his own rambunctious way; but it was grief.

"And what's wrong with my teenaged son?" the father asked me so boldly. "He is making a mess of his life. Talk some sense into him, Reverend." I said the boy was grieving, Dad, for his mother who had died three years before, grieving for what was lost and never found again, grieving for the loneliness one feels when a parent has been taken, grieving for ...Oh well, you know what I mean.... Or "Why is she so mean?" the daughter asked. "I've never seen or heard my mother talk that way before." I said, "She's grieving." And every time the funeral hearse goes rolling by, and every time we touch base with another kind of funeral, it brings it all back together there, as if we're grieving for the first time, or the last.

For waiting at the end of every day is a kind of little puppy dog who nips at your heels and whimpers, and even if you kick at him or holler or close the door, he waits and whimpers still. There is so much more to say, but it crops up in strange and unpredictable ways; and you would be wise to know it in yourself, if unaccountably you

act the fool or find some meanness you didn't know you had, or your whole attitude changes toward life and death. "Johnny died and went to Heaven," she once told me. "The rest of us have gone to Hell"... You know what I mean.. Or if you don't, I hope you'll recognize it. "He's grieving for a father that he never had," the psychiatrist alerted me; grieving for a child that was not born at all, grieving for a friend he lost when just a teen. The first time a person touches base with death and grief, it is a monumental thing.

So I suggest you learn to deal with it, not hide it or avoid it or run from it; or you will be running all your days. I've found a pattern through the years of those who lost a parent, especially a mother when quite young, that monumental episode colors life all his days, affects his ability to trust and give again. If a mother can be taken from a child, the God Almighty, anything can happen....And I suggest you learn to deal with it, to express your feelings toward it, not bury it, not hide it in the cellar or, like the barking dog we used to have at home, it does not go away when you close the cellar door; for the dog barks on and on, and annoys your sleep and annoys the neighbors and makes you cranky and makes you mad...And you know what I mean....I hope you learn to deal with it, my friend, or you will run and run with it for all your days and never know the reason why.

Dr. Kubler-Ross conducted experiments in psychodrama, teaching people to go back and grieve. Some do not let the process happen. But then, oppositely, others never let it go. Your primary purpose is to get on with life and leave the grieving to the dead. Some people cling to grief and use it as a crutch. Some will not surrender it, for it alone gives meaning to their lives. As old men love their illnesses and young men love their inexperience, some can love their grief.

In the old days, dressed in black, the widow paraded through the streets; and armbands were the thing, even at the time when I was still a boy. The wreaths were on the doors at the homes where the awful thing had struck. Well, I mean thank God we have passed that time; or have we? Have you? Have you managed to get up and go on and out with something else to do and give and think about? Or have you made your loss the measure of the life the Lord God has given you to live? have you missed the message and insulted Jesus Christ himself? Have you carelessly assaulted the citadel of God's reigning power in this earth? Have you wrapped a shell around yourself, so that you can grieve and grieve some more?

"No one else can understand," she said. I said, "Maybe, but 'Never morning wears to evening but that some heart does break' " Others have faced the enemy and lost and learned to rise to fight another battle, to bind the wounds and dust off the knees and shake the tension loose and edge out slowly, step by step. I have learned sadly through the years that some will not surrender grief.

You need to let it go and honor the dead by living with the living. And you will learn, I think I've found, to accept your lot in life in proportion to the way in which you find it belonging to the will and way and providence of God. And while still you'll stand to weep, as Jesus did outside the tomb; while still you have the right to wish it were not so, as Jesus did; while still, grudgingly, you can look over your shoulder time and time again to all the might-have-beens, which Jesus didn't - But either God has the power or He doesn't; or Christ's promise is true, or it is not - There is no other choice.

"I will not leave you comfortless; honestly I won't."

All of us are in great need of comfort, no matter how strong and proud we seem. All of us need tenderness. The biggest grouch you know needs kindness. Each and all of us need understanding - parents, husbands and their wives, bosses and employees, neighbors, fellow students, teachers too, and all, ministers included. All of us need comfort. And there is one to comfort you, my friend, one who stands and waits beside your grief at the end of every day, one who greets you every morning along-side the awful empty feel that it is true. Well, Christ is there to greet you...God Almighty waits at the top of every hill... and in every valley when, stumbling, tired and broken, you finally head for home... Well, you know what I mean...He's there and waiting for you, to welcome you...and life is more than now.

Meanwhile, Jesus says the road is long and often steep, lonely and alone sometimes; the clouds dip down to touch the earth so that you can barely see your way ahead...and lost and afraid, deafened by the noise...Listen one more time, for Jesus Christ is speaking...perhaps to you... You little child, afraid of the dark; call out for your Father...Here, here now, relax. There is nothing here to fear. I have overcome the world. Here now, I will not leave you comfortless...I will come to you and give you everything you need.

Now and evermore... Amen.