

Jesus Will Meet You in the Recurring Hour of Grief
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs
Salem United Church of Christ
December 13, 2020

But we do not want you to be uniformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1 Thess. 4:13

Advent is a season of waiting. Many of us are waiting through a season of grief. Some of us have been waiting through grief for a lifetime. All of us are acquainted enough with grief to know it is not a one-and-done affair. The reservoir of grief is deep and sorrow thought dealt with has a way of resurfacing again and again, often at unexpected hours.

Grief is particularly with us this Advent. Nearly 300,000 Americans have died from COVID. There seems to be but six degrees of separation between us and those on the roster of the 300,000, for even if we or our immediate family members have not tested positive, we know of someone who knows of someone who has died from the Coronavirus. And those who are not grieving the death of a person are grieving the loss of time that could have been spent with grandchildren, the loss of a lifestyle that is gone and seemingly irretrievable, or the loss of revenue from a business that once secure even just a few months ago.

We are a people of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

The New Testament itself was born in grief. The oldest of the New Testament books is 1 Thessalonians. It doesn't appear at the beginning of the table of contents, but it was the first of the New Testament books to be composed. It was the first letter Paul wrote as an apostle. One of the key themes it addresses is the subject of grief. Early Christian preaching led people to believe Christ would be returning soon to set everything right and lead to perfect bliss. Yet that anticipated day was not appearing. Day after day came and went, and month after month, and year after year the same. Meanwhile, people were dying before the promised day arrived. Family members passed away. Members of the church fell upon sleep. It was soon supposed that those who died were not going to get to enjoy the benefits of the promised good news, and the hearts of the survivors began to ache. A grieving church pressed Paul and the other teachers: What about these dead? What of the promise made to them? What of our heartbreak? Has death won? Has it defeated us? Has death at last defeated those we love?

Paul put pen to page to write the Thessalonian church to answer those questions. "We do not want you to be uniformed, sisters and brothers," he said, "about those who have died . . ." He went on to say those Christians should "not grieve as others do who have no hope." Turning that saying around and putting it in its positive form, Paul's teaching is that Christians should grieve as people with hope.

Let's lift that answer from the first century and apply it to our sorrowing lives in the twenty-first century: grieve with hope.

Christianity says to grieve.

Grief is the pain and sorrow we feel at the loss of someone dear. Grief is the raw wound that is left on our hearts after death has ripped away someone to whom we are deeply attached. It is a continuation of the love we have for that person even though that person is no longer present to be loved. It is our longing to share a thought or a story that has just happened. It is our longing to hear a familiar voice now stilled and to feel an embrace no longer possible. It is a yearning and aching to be again in the presence of one whose presence was life and goodness and joy to our souls. There is no statute of limitations on grief. Given its rootage in the love we have for one who has died, it is foolish to suppose we ever get over our grief. Its intensity lessens in time, but it returns on predictable days and unexpected hours. When it returns we find the well of sorrow is deep and never runs dry.

Grief is unique. I want to get this said before we get too much farther, for unhelpful expectations can get tangled up with our grief, preventing its natural flow. Grief is unique. By that I mean that no two people grieve in the same way and you shouldn't expect to grieve the way other people do and they should not expect you to. Some grieve with tears, but not all do. Some grieve with words, but others prefer silence. Some are stopped for a while, but others are frantic with activity. Some show their heartbreak right on their faces while others in their outward demeanor can seem totally unaffected. One size does not fit all and one style does not suit all. Just because you do not see your ways of grieving in someone else's manner does not mean they are not grieving, and just because you do not see in yourself someone else's way of handling heartbreak does not mean you are disrespectful or unloving. Grief manifests itself in a variety of ways. Our grieving is unique.

Grief is sometimes supposed to be incompatible with faith. One of my seminary professors has a line in one of his books in which he says people go to church feeling like hell.¹ Inside themselves they are quivering and shaking and spinning and questioning and even lashing out, but they suppress all that in order to project the piety and conviction and stained-glass manner they think they are expected to show. Martha, for example, was grieving the death of her brother, Lazarus. Her heart was torn in two because she was no longer going to hear that familiar voice calling down the stairs or the slamming of the back door when he went in and out. She was never again going to hear the contagious laughter of his that she couldn't resist when he teased her about those little things she took more seriously than he. All that was welling up inside her, and then here comes Jesus, their friend who was always talking of God, whose faith seemed easy, and who was always full of religion. When Martha was with Jesus she pushed her grief down and outwardly projected the faith she thought she was supposed to have: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn. 11:24). It was as if she thought grief and faith could not co-exist.

But grief is permitted to the Christian! What kind of faith is it, what kind of religion is it, that takes a heartbroken love, raw with pain over loss, and tosses it to the ground and steps on it as though it is extinguishing a cigarette butt? Certainly it is not the Christian faith at its gospel best. It stands out in our text that Christians are permitted to grieve. The text puts it in the negative – that you do not grieve as others do who have no hope – but its meaning is fully

¹ Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Gospel According to the Wall Street Journal* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975). P. 110.

positive: grieve with hope. The same idea stands out in the Call to Worship that appears in the funeral service found in the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship*:

Friends, [it begins] we gather here in the protective shelter of God's healing love. We are free to pour out our grief, release our anger, face our emptiness, and know that God cares.

Christianity gives us permission and encouragement to grieve, to be honest with ourselves and God and others about all our hearts feel.

Christianity says to grieve with hope.

Our text, phrased again in the positive, gives instruction in how to grieve.

It does not prescribe a particular way to grieve. There is an Emily Dickinson poem I sometimes quote to myself when I am walking toward a home following a death.

There's been a Death, in the Opposite House,
As lately as Today –
I know it, by the numb look
Such Houses have – alway –
.....
The Minister – goes stiffly in –
As if the House were His –
And He owned all the Mourners – now –
And little Boys – besides –²

Neither the minister nor the church can claim any ownership or right to prescribe the proper way to grieve. We can't say you have to find comfort in these texts, in these hymns of a minor key, or that you have to shed this many tears and wear black for these many days. There is no instruction manual like that from the church. Grief, as I said earlier, has a wide range of expressions and many different and legitimate manifestations.

But while our text for today and Christianity as a whole do not offer a prescription for how to grieve they do proffer a hope to put right alongside grief. Some prescriptions say to take a medicine with food. Christianity says to grieve always with hope. The hope is rooted in the resurrection. That's how Paul expands upon the text to the Thessalonians. He tells them this. Christ was raised. The dead have been raised. You will be raised. You are separated now but you will meet again and from that point on nothing will ever separate you. There may have been in the back of his mind that line from a psalmist who proclaimed, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

I saw this Christian ideal expressed in a Facebook post the other day. It was from a guy who was a year ahead of me in school back in Huntley. He married one of his classmates and they had, I believe, four daughters. One of those girls died of cancer seven years ago at age 26. She was engaged to be married, but death took her before that day was to be. The Facebook post was written by her father on the seventh anniversary of her death. You know how those anniversary days are. They are days when grief resurfaces and the old agony is suddenly fresh again. The father's post alluded to the excruciating loss, the reality and severity of it, but also to

² *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960), p. 185, 186.

the anticipation of a joyful reunion in heaven on some unknown day in the future. He wasn't repressing the grief, tamping it down as if he thought it shouldn't be there. Grief and hope were existing side by side in the same heart and in the same feeling. He was grieving, but not as others do who have no hope. He was grieving with hope.

Those who have lived with grief for a lifetime know that grief can be a fast runner who can take hold of life and quickly take it far to a place of incredible sadness, but they likewise know that grief is not so fast that it can outrun hope. When grief has you in its hands and is carrying you away and away to sadness and sorrow, hope runs circles round the grief and says, "Fear not, I am with you still."

Well, there is the Advent we are in. I do not mean the liturgical season of four Sundays before Christmas. I mean the lifetime of waiting to see once more someone who was here but is now gone. I mean the season of waiting for the day when tears are transformed into laughter, mourning into dancing, and aching emptiness into fullness of joy. Jesus meets us in this hour of recurring grief, and he gives us both the permission to grieve and the promise of hope. He cries with us and through tears unashamed points to the day that shall surely be.

What Paul said to the Thessalonians, I say to you: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." This day of our sadness is not the day that shall last forever; the coming day is the one that shall be forevermore and we will be with Christ and those whom we love.