

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 “Good Grief”

The first funeral I ever did was nine years before I was even ordained as a minister. Honestly, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in ministry. Presiding at funerals wasn't even on my radar yet. I'd only been to two funerals in my life. And this funeral was difficult for even seasoned ministers. My best friend throughout grade school and junior high had been hit by a car while he was riding his bicycle. It didn't kill him immediately. He wasn't wearing a helmet so the resulting head injury caused his brain to swell, and that's what eventually killed him. It was pretty tragic. What made it even harder was that I really hadn't been that close to him since ninth grade. He was having a hard time processing his parents' divorce so he started taking drugs to cope. He was the poster-boy for folks who argue that weed is a gateway to worse drugs, because for him it was. Anything he could get his hands on he'd take. Pot, crank, acid, coke, mushrooms ... it was all good for him. He pushed most of his friends away and started hanging out with a crowd that would do just about anything to get money for their drugs. He even made an attempt to burglarize the convenience store where we bought our comic books and after-school snacks which was the equivalent, in my mind, of desecrating a church. That was holy ground for a kid.

So we went our separate ways in high school. He barely graduated and had no plans to do anything other than work at a little gas station outside of town and deal drugs. Then the gas station job ended when he lost his driver's license for having too many DUIs. I went off to college and never really thought about him much and then his mom called me one day to tell me about the accident. The hospital where they took him was just across the street from my college so I was able to visit him even though he was in a coma. Finally his mom decided to take him off life support and he died shortly after. Then she asked me to do what I hoped she wouldn't ask. She asked me to do his funeral. She said I was the last “good” friend he had and since I was going into ministry, it would be an honor if I could preside.

I was being asked to conduct a religious ceremony for someone whose relationship had gone from complicated to compromised because of our lifestyle choices. How was I going to do this? I didn't have the first clue about how to do a funeral. So our college chaplain helped me plan the service, and even then, I felt very ill-equipped. What would I say? What was appropriate? What was *not* appropriate? How would I address the fact that I really didn't know him anymore and hadn't for six years? Where were the glimmers of hope in all of this? On one hand, he died riding a bicycle because he lost his right to drive due to his out-of-control addiction. But on the other hand, he was riding it to the first "legit" job he had since he started his drug habit. Would he have died if he was driving a car? But then, would he be on a path to recovery if he hadn't hit rock bottom by losing his license? Who knows. It was heart-wrenching either way. I consider Steve's service to be the most difficult I've ever done and I still have a hard time talking about it.

In our scripture this morning, we're continuing our study of David, the still soon-to-be King of Israel. He just lost his best friend Jonathan and his mentor King Saul at the battle of Mount Gilboa. David had a complicated relationship with King Saul. On one hand, Saul was his mentor as well as his king and second father. On the other hand, David spent a great deal of time at odds with Saul. On several occasions, they were prepared and willing to kill each other. To complicate matters, David's best friend, Jonathan, was Saul's son. David, who was a talented musician, sang a lamentation as their eulogy. It eventually became a national song of mourning called "The Song of the Bow."

Okay, let's go ahead and address one of the white elephants in the room today. Some of you are thinking, "Why isn't Mary preaching this sermon? She's the grief counselor! Isn't that like having Chris Stratton as your starting pitcher, but you send Pablo Sandoval out on the mound instead?" Yeah, they're both on the Giants' pitching roster, but ... *really?* Yes, I get it. But she's taking the kids to camp this morning, so you have me and she's a good coach. Something that she and I both believe is that a memorial service is an occasion to celebrate life. And

this is exactly what David did. He rose above his struggle with Saul and showed the king respect. David also mourned with his raw emotions. He wasn't afraid to show his feelings. He wasn't afraid to acknowledge his "bromance" with Jonathan. Profound friendships like theirs are rare and beautiful gifts to behold. David's song is an unrestrained outpouring of grief. It's a testament to the sense of desolation that grief often brings. The person I loved more than any other in the world is gone, and no comforting theory about how much better off he is will make any difference because *I'm* not better off. I'm *alone*. My friend and I have been torn apart.

We've all experienced grief in some shape or form. It may not even be due to the death of a loved one as in David's case. We grieve when relationships dissolve. We grieve when we're laid off from a job we love. We grieve when something that's been a part of our lives all of a sudden isn't there anymore. My prayers go out to the members of New Vision United Church of Christ as they get ready to have their last worship service next week. The church that's been a vital part of these folks' lives ... the visible ministry that was built by faithful hands will come to an end. There will be folks who grieve over this loss and who will need as much support and understanding as someone whose loved one has died.

Have you ever been in a place of grief and some well-intentioned person comes along with a sack full of platitudes? In the case of the death of a loved one, they might say, "He's in a better place now." "Everything happens for a reason." Or in case of a child's death – "Well at least you have two others to love." "God just needed another little angel in heaven and took her early." Sometimes people will try to *minimize* your grief ... especially if they don't understand. Some people don't understand why pet owners grieve so hard when their beloved dog or cat dies and they'll say things like, "It was just a dog. They don't live as long as people. You should have expected this when you got one." Or, "Oh, you can just get a new one." For some reason people think this applies to miscarriages too. "Oh, you can just try again." Or when you

lose a job you loved: “Just apply for other jobs.” Folks who are experiencing the pain of divorce probably want to punch the person who says, “You’ll get over it. There’s plenty of other fish in the sea.”

I love the fact that the Bible honors grief by including the expression of grief in Holy Scripture. Think about the Book of Lamentations. Think about how many of the Psalms are expressions of grief and communal mourning on behalf of God’s people. And in every case, grief is lifted up as a good, healthy expression of one’s feelings. The only exception is the book of Job, but only because most of the book is dedicated to the *bad* example of Job’s friends who try to tell him, “Well, you know the reason all these tragic things happened to you is because God is punishing you for some sin in your life that you may or may not even be aware of.” In the end of that book, though, God defends Job and actually *affirms* his grief.

If you notice in our scripture this morning, David’s song shows us that grief isn’t just a personal experience. As I mentioned earlier, a community can feel grief. Even a *nation* can experience grief. We bear the grief of our national opioid addiction crisis. We bear the grief of domestic violence. We bear the grief of people who have been displaced from work or who can’t find jobs that pay living wages. We bear the grief of those who are uninsured or underinsured and who are a hospital visit away from bankruptcy. We bear the grief of people who are treated differently because of their age or generation or skin color or sexuality or culture or physical disabilities or whatever puts them in the category of “other.” We bear the grief of those whose undiagnosed or untreated mental illnesses keeps them on the margins. We bear the grief of an appalling percentage of young people who choose to end their life by suicide. We bear the grief of those who have been displaced because of natural disasters: wild fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes even volcanoes in Hawaii. We bear the grief of those whose families have been torn apart by human-made disasters too. We bear the grief of a lot of these things ... especially those which are left largely undealt with.

Of course, in the church, we're in the business of addressing "Where is God in all this?" Because sometimes God seems absent. Even Jesus experienced that absence when in the midst of the agony and grief of his own death, Jesus said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Most anyone who has experienced deep grief will know something about that feeling. We don't talk about it much, because for the most part, our culture wants to repress grief which is probably due to a toxic myth among many Christians that you should never express doubts about God or even worse ... anger towards God.

Of course, Jesus' cry of abandonment wasn't the end of his story. And it's not the whole of the story for us either. Ever wonder why this table is so central to our worship? Why it's the last thing we do before we send folks out to face the world? Well ... there are many reasons, but let me give you one to think about: When Jesus took the bread and said, "This is my body, broken for you," when Jesus took the cup and said, "this is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins" he used terms that express brokenness and grief. What we do here every week isn't some trite little memorial for a death that happened 2,000 years ago. What's happening here at this table is that God is becoming one with us in *our* brokenness and then turning the whole experience around so that *through* brokenness we can become one with God. But this isn't just a "table of grief" is it? It's also the Table of thanksgiving. How can grief and thanksgiving occupy the same space though? Because God's response to a broken and dysfunctional world is not to destroy it and start again, but to incorporate its woundedness into the very being of God so that now our experiences of brokenness and grief are actually taking us deep into the heart of God ... into the experience of God's own being. Here at this table, the broken Christ offers himself to us, embracing us, wounds and all, so that we might know that we are loved, cherished and understood.