

The voyage from grief to gratitude

Grief is an ocean that flows in waves, a rolling turbulence in the soul desperate for peace.

Sometimes grief is a tsunami, sudden and surprising: death by overdose, heart attack or fatal accident. In a moment the, tectonic plates of life shift forever. Sometimes grief comes quietly, over time, like waves off the Oregon coast gently lapping the shore, lulling our senses and turning our attention away from pending danger of much larger “sneaker” waves that, with unexpected speed and force, can knock you off your feet. Long-suffering illness and debilitating disease after months of prayer can bring grief to us this way.

Whether the waves of grief come to you in shock or quiet, pain persists long after our feet find solid ground, emotions quickly returning when some familiar scent or turn of phrase triggers memory of loss, and the heart floods with a deep ache.

Grief is a voyage no one chooses but all must venture; for oneself, with those we love and those we are called to serve. How does a leader navigate the waters from grief to gratitude? What do you say? What do you do? Here, as in all things, we look to Jesus as model.

Empathy

The writer to the Hebrews recalls how God has named Jesus our “great high priest” who is able to “empathize with our weaknesses.” Sometimes we interpret this to mean that, “Jesus has empathy because he shares our experience.” But this is neither what Jesus does nor what empathy is.

As research professor and author, Brene Brown, writes, “Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience.”¹ Merely connecting to an experience, Brown warns, leaves oneself detached and prone to comparison that has little to offer beyond empty words of comfort such as, “At least...” or “It could be worse...”

Jesus connects to feelings under the experience, to the grief caused by loss. So, for example, when visiting the grave of his friend Lazarus,² Jesus weeps not for death, but in consolidation to the grief of Mary and Martha. Tears of empathy flow down Jesus’ face, mourning the loss of their beloved brother. Note also that Jesus does not debate Mary and Martha’s protests, “If only you were here...” with words of judgment. Instead, he offers hope of faith and grace.

The same word John uses for the graveside tears of Jesus is picked up and used again by Luke recording the emotion-packed scene of Jesus’ triumphal entry. With shouts of “Hosanna” ringing through the air, Jesus’ caravan crests a hill and Jerusalem comes into full view. The disciples and pilgrims must have been filled with joyful expectation. But then Jesus “saw the city and wept over it,”³ mourning the future grief of a people who could not now recognize God’s kingdom peace. Empathy is not for an event only—at a funeral or time of death—but for the path of tears ahead.

Following Jesus’ example, what would it look like for you to offer empathy to those in grief? Brene Brown lists five essential skills:⁴

- To be able to see the world as others see it, or perspective taking (which requires “becoming the learner not the knower.”)
- To be nonjudgmental
- To understand another person’s feelings
- To communicate our understanding of that person’s feelings, and
- To pay attention to what is happening in conversation

Presence

Real empathy requires a twofold presence: the presence of God in Christ and Spirit and your personal, physical presence. To minister to grief, you have to show up.

The incarnation is Jesus showing up, with God. Perhaps nowhere is this more poignant than Jesus prayer life, culminating in Gethsemane, “Abba, Father, everything is possible with you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”⁵ Again, the writer to the Hebrews describes the scene eloquently: “During the days of his life on earth, Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”⁶

Once again, we find Jesus in reverent tears, this time in reverent submission to his father. Hebrews says that Jesus’ prayer was “heard.” Yet the Father’s answer to Jesus’ question was, “No.” The cup was not taken away. For Jesus, God’s will was a cross. With Jesus, you can pray for relief and keep faith when God says “No” because the resurrection turns every “no” to “yes.” Sitting quietly with those who grieve, holding a hand and offering prayer to the “One Who hears,” your presence brings hope for peace through the resurrected Lord.

The voyage from grief to gratitude can be long and lonely. But to those who grieve, you can offer two great gifts: empathy and presence, and, by doing so, bring Jesus’ words, “Peace, be still”⁷ to quiet the storm.

--Jim Van Yperen

¹ *Dare To Lead*, Random House, NY 2018, page 141

² John 11:1-45

³ Luke 19:41-44

⁴ *Dare To Lead*, Quoting nursing scholar, Theresa Wiseman

⁵ Mark 14:36

⁶ Hebrews 5: 7-9

⁷ Matthew 8:23-27