

# The Stewardship of Grief

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**November 12, 2017**  
**I Thessalonians 4:13-18**

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Are you familiar with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' "five stages of grief," developed in the late 1960s? *Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*. The Kubler-Ross scholars acknowledge that this approach has often been perceived of as a process – a kind of checklist where you move from one stage to the next in a linear fashion until you land at acceptance. They understand now, as do many psychologists, that grief does not work that way, that grief is not a process.

I am not a psychologist, but my own experience and the experience of many of you has taught me that that's true, that grief is not a process but is, for want of a clinical term, a *journey*. Sometimes it's a journey absent a map. Sometimes it's a journey that goes forward and backward and sideways, sometimes all at the same time. Sometimes it's a journey that pauses for a brief while or a long while. A journey that asks the question "How do we live missing those we've lost?"

The first step in the grief journey is to acknowledge grief itself, its power and presence and reality, a sense of loss and diminishment.

We were big fans of the original "Will and Grace." In the revamped version, Rosario, Karen's "maid and sparring partner," dies. Karen, true to form, spends the length of the funeral at the bar, drinking. Later, alone, she sits by Rosario's casket.

"People keep asking, 'What do you need? What do you need?'" Karen says, mocking everyone's concerned tone. But then she crumbles, just a little: "I need for you to not be gone."

That is what we need – a spouse, a child, a parent, 26 Baptists in Texas. We need them not to be gone.

A dear friend of mine died in August, a minister, 59, whose family cared for me greatly when I was just a young ministry intern. I attended her funeral in Indianapolis, where a mentor of mine took on the brave task of preaching. He didn't flinch, not one bit. He raged against the cancer and acknowledged what we were all experiencing. We are a "community of broken hearts," he said. A community of broken hearts. And we are. Even now.

We grieve, yes. But we do not despair. Our grief does not have the final word. We are not weak in our brokenness, nor are we without faith. Or consolation. Or encouragement. Or hope.

Paul understood this. In what is likely the oldest of Paul's letters, he writes to a Thessalonian community asking questions about loved ones who have died. Paul writes that he does not want the church to "grieve as others do who have no hope." Paul continues, with very little detail, about what this looks like – reconciliation, reunion.

The scholar Jane Patterson writes that Paul seeks to make "ultimate realities that are beyond ordinary sight so real that (we) can entrust (ourselves) completely to them." Our loved ones have died, yes, but we remain in community with them. Paul's vision, Patterson says, is that "heaven and earth are suddenly and beautifully reconciled in an embrace that takes place in a newly opened space between heaven and earth and which will never end."

We have hope, Karoline Lewis writes, from which we find "comfort, encouragement, and faith in the face of (our) loss." Because Jesus died and rose again, this hope is not wishful or fanciful thinking. It is grounded in the "comforting presence of Christ."

Lewis writes: "...Paul is not saying the community should not grieve. On the contrary, grief is the expected emotion when faced with the painful loss of a loved one. At the same time, the grief of the believer is grounded in and defined by

hope. This interconnectedness of the profound emotions of grief and hope is a mark of a community who confess Jesus Christ as Lord.”

We are a collection of broken hearts formed into a community of broken hearts. And we are not without hope, now, or ever. We trust God in the promises of faith, for us and those we love. Because Easter is not a one-time thing, we hold a long-term view about reconciliation. And that same hope allows us to face the immediate reality of grief differently.

What does that look like? Anne Lamott writes that: “You will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through. It’s like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.”

In his book *Promise Me, Dad*, former vice president Joe Biden, who lost a wife and infant daughter decades ago and a son in just the past year, describes how he “explains to people in mourning that their sadness will last a long time, and that the smallest sensory cue—a song, a scent—may bring forth, in sudden and painful fashion, a vivid memory of the departed. And yet, he tells them, the time will come when the memory ‘will bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eyes.’” (*Vanity Fair*, December 2017)

I hope that that can be the case for you in your journey with grief, that you can dance, even with a limp, that a smile can intercede at times through the tears. And when that cannot be the case, I pray, I hope, that you – that we – can find hope. Can find consolation and encouragement, in community. Can find hope in the face of our grief as we cling fast to one another and cling fast to the promises of our faith, the promises of resurrection and reconciliation and reunion, that the ones we have lost have been granted eternal rest and that perpetual light shines upon them. Amen.

(Followed by Morton Lauridsen’s “Lux Aeterna,” performed by the Third Church Chancel Choir and orchestra)

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Prayers of the People, Lynette K. Sparks

God of life, you created the world and called it good. In Jesus Christ you came to redeem us; his resurrection is our promise of eternal life. By the power of your Spirit you claim us, strengthen us, and prepare us to live with you in glory.

In sure and certain hope, we pray for your world, that we may live into your coming reign of justice and peace. Wherever the church thrives and wherever it struggles— keep us faithful to your gospel.

In Sutherland Springs, Texas, Your church bears the unspeakable pain of so many lives lost. Bear them up with your strong hand, Eternal God, and carry them through grief and anger to one day hope again.

And end the stalemate, O God, in our government, that leaves weapons of war available for exploitation and massive harm. Grant our leaders wisdom and a resolve to do justice.

And this Veteran's Day weekend, grant them the commitment to care for all those who serve and have served our country. Give your special care to those who have returned different than when they left - troubled, angry, wounded, and broken.

Creator God, heal the wounds of our planet, and make us better stewards of its wonders and gifts. . . .

Compassionate Christ, calm the fears of those who are dying, and welcome them into your eternal peace. . . . Give relief to people who suffer from anxieties and ills. Feed and protect those who endure the days and nights without food or shelter. Comfort those who suffer in silence—carrying secret sorrows. . . .

Guide all who seek your face to find you.

With thanks that you hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken, with prayers for those who are unable to pray themselves, we entrust all of life to you, gracious God, our Alpha and Omega, our only hope in life and in death. Amen.

*Adapted from Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 2*