

Grieving As Those Who Have Hope
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
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Being in such close proximity to Candler School of Theology, I don't know if any of you ever had the privilege of hearing Fred Craddock preach. He taught preaching there for a number of years and also spent a lifetime preaching real sermons to real people in real churches. Fred Craddock often brings the Gospel alive by telling stories that are deceptively simple yet deeply profound. In fact, his stories are so compelling that two Craddock protégés compiled some of his stories and published them under the title *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press), 2001. As I studied our last narrative of this summer's walk through David's life, I remembered one of those "Craddock stories." In it, Craddock tells of an encounter he during a flight:

I was once, years ago, going out to San Diego, and I was on that side of the plane that just has two seats. You know, some of the planes have three seats on one side, two on the other. I was on the side with two seats, on the aisle, and this woman, looked to be in her forties, was at the window. I spoke to her. I usually work on the plane, read, study, read a paper, whatever, but I noticed she was crying, noticeably crying. And, you know, being a minister and all, you're supposed to say something. So I said, "I see this is not a very happy trip for you." See, I'm very perceptive.

She said, "No, it isn't."

"Well, I'm sorry."

She said, "I'm going to my father's funeral."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry." She kept crying.

What else could I say? "I can tell by your tears that you and your father were very close."

And she said, "No, on the contrary, I have not spoken to my father, written to my father, called my father, seen my father, in seventeen years. Seventeen years."

"Really?"

"In fact," she said, "the last time I saw him I was in his home, and we got into a quarrel. I left the table, threw my napkin in my plate, and as I slammed the door leaving his house, I said, 'You can go to hell.' That's the last thing I said to my father. And now he's dead." (pp.143-144.)

What a sad way to grieve...with no resolution, no reconciliation from an angry act. It happens sometimes in families and I'm not sure the person left behind ever gets over it.

Many, many years ago now, a family I was acquainted with had a son who was at a senior high church camp. He and some friends were supposed to leave the camp early because they were signed up to take the SAT back home. But the son had met a girl that week. And a camp romance is a lot more important and immediate than an SAT. So, he called home and

asked if he could stay at camp instead. His father said no. The son pleaded, but the answer was still no. He asked to speak to his mother, who might understand this matter of the heart more sympathetically. Perhaps knowing she'd have a hard time being as firm as his dad, his mother refused to come to the phone. The call ended in anger. Early the next morning, that group of young men got in the car and headed home. But there was a wreck on the way. Their son alone was killed. When I met those parents, years later, the pain and toll of their son's death was etched deeply into their faces. Faithful, generous, tender, loving, but carrying in them a wound that never really healed—from his death, to be sure, but also underneath that perhaps, the wound of those last angry words between them ...over nothing, really.

David and his son Absalom were estranged like that. They had made up once already. After Absalom killed his brother, Amnon—who had raped his half-sister Tamar—Absalom ran away and lived in exile for three years. Amnon had been David's eldest son and heir to the throne, so it took awhile, but Absalom was allowed to come back home. But not too long after that, Absalom decided he'd take his father's throne for himself. Absalom was beautiful, 2 Samuel 14:25-27 tells us, "from the sole of his foot to the crown of head." And he had quite a head of hair, which he would cut once a year and weigh it to see how heavy it was all piled up high there on the scale. So Absalom had no trouble attracting a lot of men in Israel who wanted to help him become king sooner rather than later. So many rallied around Absalom, in fact, that David fled Jerusalem in fear.

But Absalom's youthful ambitions were no match for David's seasoned war experience. David and his trusty old commander Joab put together a well-organized army to fight off the guerrilla tactics of Absalom's supporters. By the time the battle got underway, David and Absalom seemed hopelessly estranged.

David did not fight in this battle himself...still, the king told all of the military leaders and every foot soldier heard the order, too: "Deal gently with the young man Absalom." The estrangement between father and son is evident in how the writer of 2 Samuel records it: the *king* said, "Deal gently with *the young man*." Their familial ties are absent altogether.

The battle and its outcome only take two verses to tell: 6-8. But fourteen long verses stretch the tension that follows, as Absalom is not dealt with gently at all. And it is ironically his beautiful hair that does him in, catching in the branches of a tree as he rides through a forest. Suspending him "between heaven and earth." It is Joab, again, who does the dirty work for his king. Joab stabs Absalom to death as he hangs from that tree. Two runners make haste back to David, bringing word of the war's outcome to their king...the king who is in truth also an anxious father. This tension between his love for his son and the alienation between them is still evident as David asks each runner: "Is it well with the young man Absalom?"

But all of that narrative distance dissolves with death. David goes to his room and weeps and cries out over and over again in words so other many parents have cried out in grief: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Five times he says it as if it might somehow bring him back, restore him, restore *them* to each other: my son, my son, my son, my son, my son!"

In just a moment, Commander Joab will want to cut short this grieving. Joab will knock on David's door and tell him to pull himself together, to be the king everyone expects him to be; to be the king his soldiers deserve since they risked their lives to protect his throne. But our reading ends before all that, leaving us in the unsettling presence of David's deep grief.

It is uncomfortable to stand in this inconsolable place with David. It is uncomfortable to stand, to stay even with people we know and love well when they are doubled over in grief. So, even though this text is about royal family and royal dysfunction, it is also about something fundamental and deep in our own lives: grief. This morning I want to offer a few observations about grief. And I will freely admit that these are things I have learned from people I have pastored in times of heavy grief. They have been my own most trusted tutors.

The first observation is this: Out of our own discomfort with grief, we can try to make it better too soon. Perhaps you have heard the story of the little girl who got home from visiting her friend later than her mother expected. When her mother asked the reason for the delay, the child said, "I was helping Jane. Her doll broke." The mother asked, "Oh, did you help her fix it?" The child replied, "No, I helped her cry." (From *Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief*, by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Perennial Press, 2002, reading for July 21st.)

When someone we know is hit with terrible loss and grief, we do not need to jump in too soon with assurances that everything will be all right. Nor do we need to hang back and, not knowing what to say, say nothing at all. We think we shouldn't bring up the loss for fear of "upsetting" the person we care about or "making them cry." Yet talking or crying may just what the person needs. They at least need to have the death acknowledged...it is real. People grieving don't want us to come up with "answers," and really don't need words of any kind at all. But they will welcome a card or a casserole; an embrace; or simply the fellowship of our tears. No one expects us to "fix it," for if it could be fixed they would gladly have done that themselves. Grief must be endured. So perhaps the best way we can help is to make a space for the person's tears, or their story, or for their aching, unresolved silence in our presence.

A second observation is that, especially in the wake of a tragic death, Christians—even clergy—sometimes speak and operate out of a theology that I think is unhelpful at best and flat wrong in its worst form. A member of a church I once served went to a grief group sponsored by another church in the community. I asked her if she had found it helpful. She told me that the people were nice, then she hesitated...but said, "The group leader told us that nothing happens to us that is not God's will for us. Is this *really* what we believe?" she asked. And the rest of her sentence would have been, "Because if that is so, then I want no part of such a God or of a church that worships such a God."

Some of you may already be familiar with a sermon William Sloane Coffin preached many years ago now. Former chaplain at Yale and pastor for many years of Riverside Church in New York City, Coffin was a well-known preacher and activist for social justice. But this sermon is the one he preached the week after his 24-year-old son, Alex, died in a car accident. Driving in a terrible storm, Alex's car veered off of a bridge and into the Boston Harbor.

At one point in this sermon that many grieving parents have found helpful, Coffin told of his own encounter with “bad theology.” He said: “When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister’s house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God.’

“Instantly, I was up and in hot pursuit swarming all over her. I’ll say you don’t, lady! ...Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he had probably had a couple of ‘frosties’ too many? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road, and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?”

Coffin then continued: “For some reason nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. ...The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It is the will of God.’ Never do we know enough to say that.

“My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” Later in the sermon, Coffin expresses gratitude for the many people who came to him with modest words or no words, but with deep love. Of them he said: “You gave me what God gives all of us—minimum protection, maximum support.” (The sermon can be found in William Sloane Coffin’s collection of sermons, *The Courage to Love*. San Francisco: Harper&Row, Publishers, 1984, pp. 93-98.)

God does not wrap us in a protective cocoon so that we are untouched in this life. Untouched by pain and suffering and grief might be a relief. But untouched by love and grace and joy would be a shame. We are here to experience love in its fullness...which inevitably means that we will also experience sadness and grief.

And this brings me to the third and last observation for this morning. The struggle with loss and grief can call everything into question. We question ourselves. We question others. We question the basic structure of the universe. And we question God. Grief may engage us in an exhausting spiritual struggle about how we will now live with, or for some people, how we will live without God. I have known some who decide random fate is the only thing they now believe in. Others spiral down in depression and despair. Others abandon the spiritual struggle altogether and seek solace in drugs or alcohol or one relationship after another...hoping for temporary relief of grief’s symptoms at least.

But the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ offers us something more than despair or random fate. God offers us hope. Not easy optimism that denies reality. But hope. Hope that

has long roots to a God who has been known for making a way out of no way; for leading people into life and freedom when it seems they are at a dead-end. It is this kind of hope that sends Peter and John running to the tomb that Sunday morning after the women announced what seemed too good to be true. It is the hope that comes from faith in the Risen Christ. No, God did not rescue him from death. He died. And was buried. Yet God made, can still make, out of death, resurrection. Someone has said that “Despair shapes an attitude of mind. Hope creates a quality of soul.” (Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 106.)

And this is where we come in. We are called, in part, to be a community of hope in the midst of grief. We are to have this quality of soul among us. A woman I knew fell into deep grief after her husband’s sudden death. She quit coming to church. Since she and I were close, I went to ask her why she was staying away from worship. She told me it was just too hard for her. “I can’t sing the hymns because I start to cry. And I can’t pray the Lord’s Prayer or join in the Affirmation of Faith. I just don’t know if my faith is strong enough right now...or ever will be again.” I asked her to come back. Even if she couldn’t sing or couldn’t pray or couldn’t affirm her faith anymore.

“That is why we’re here,” I said. “We will sing for you; we will pray on your behalf; we will say what you right now struggle to say or to affirm. We will be the community who hopes for you...until your own hope comes back or becomes new in you.”

She did come back to worship. And she let us carry the faith for her, sing and pray in hope, for her for a long time. Since then she has known more terrible loss than most of us will ever face, but she has also experienced the sweetest and loveliest love and joy. And she sings and prays again...feeling it is her turn now to carry others through their time of grief and despair and questioning.

When we accompany people through grief in these ways, we are imitating God...who for some reason offers us minimum protection, but thankfully gives us maximum support. And since, in our community of hope, with this quality of soul, we believe Jesus died and rose again, we continue to sing and pray and affirm our faith; believing that we and those we love will be caught up together with him forever. And that every estrangement between us will be healed, put away, reconciled; that we will be *restored* to each other by grace, mercy and a peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.