

Sermon given by Clint Dixon – August 25, 2024

Please be seated

Two super short poems:

“That time, I thought I could not
go any closer to grief without dying.

I went closer and I did not die.
Surely God had his hand in this as well as his friends.”

And a second short poem:

‘Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this too, was a gift.’

Good Morning:

The short poems I led with, entitled Heavy and The Uses of Sorrow, were by Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, as a reflection on the death of her forever companion, Molly Malone Cook, a renowned photographer. I have another favorite poet, among many, Langston Hughes, whose short poem ‘Island’, deals with the same subject, Grief. Here is his:

‘Wave of sorrow, do not drown me now

I see the island still ahead somehow

I see the island and its sands are fair:

Wave of sorrow, take me there.’

Aristotle said:”The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”

Poetry, in its essence, is a form of art.

I guess you all have discerned that I want to talk about grief and how to deal with it. You would be right. We can learn from grief. We may never get over it, or feel better after it passes, if it passes, but we can adapt. We can learn from the darkness and we can hope to ultimately get to the island whose sands are fair.

Victor Frankl, in 'Man's Search for Meaning' wrote: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms; to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." My wife beautiful Marie is kind enough to remind me of that every day and I love her for it. She is as wise as Solomon, as strong as Samson, and has patience like Job. She needs all of those characteristics, because she's married to me.

I think you would also agree, that our Lord Jesus had a very good attitude in his responses. He responded with kindness, compassion, instruction, miracles, stories, parables and loving tears, as in the people's misery at the death of Lazarus. Jesus, also, epitomized the word of God. Jesus was characterized by some as a 'man of sorrow'. He said, in the Beatitudes, as reported in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' They will be comforted.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book 'On Death and Dying' examined the five most common emotional reactions to loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. Years after her book, she extended that model to include other stages of loss, so it became the five stages of grief co-authored with David Kessler. Grief is a perception of loss, such as loss of a loved one or death of a friend or a spouse.

Also, it could be a real change in your life; such as a new school, a move to a new city, isolation for any reason, new job or the loss of one. Perception is how you feel about the loss, everyone mourns differently. Grief does not discriminate. It happens to all of us.

Here are the definitions of the five stages of grief:

Denial: is a common defense mechanism, immediate reaction, doubt the reality of the loss at first and a temporary response that carries you through the first wave of pain.

Anger: Why me, what did I do to deserve this? causes irritability, bitterness, anxiety, rage and impatience. It is a necessary stage to move forward.

Bargaining: You are willing to do anything to restore your life before the loss. Frequent questions are: what if; if I only did XYZ everything would be back to normal. It is helping you confront the reality of your loss.

Depression: Is not a mental health problem. People experience depression in different ways. There is no deadline to overcome it. It is a natural and appropriate response to grief, sometimes involving intense sadness or despair.

Acceptance: It is not being ok with what happened. Acceptance is how you acknowledge the loss you experienced and how you learn to adjust to your new life and learn to live with the loss.

Grief is uncomfortable, doesn't happen in a vacuum, and after all the sympathy and well-wishes, the grief still goes on. Maya Angelou said: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you make them feel." The same is true of grieving folks, they will not remember what you said, but how you made them feel. If you have a church member, friend or relative, someone you know or love, whose grieving, tradition says you bring them a casserole or hot food of some kind, or take them out to lunch or dinner. That is you loving them and making them feel good, temporarily, in their time of trouble. That's also, you being a companion to them. Companion is from the Latin word Com (together with) plus panis (bread). Together with bread. That is you being there for them. There's plenty of evidence throughout the Scriptures of the companionship of God loving all of us through food. In addition to the very well known story about Manna from Heaven, in Deuteronomy chapter 14 there's a whole section about tithes. In it there's a law about celebrating before the Lord's House with your family and the Levites, by enjoying a meal from the proceeds of the tithe. Isaiah chapter 25:6 says: On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines. I'm in for that; what about you? Psalm 23:5A says about God: You prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies and Psalm 104:14-15 says: You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people

to use to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart; and Jesus says, according to the Gospel of John chapter 6 “I am the bread of Life” after he fed the 5000+. Food is love. God signals that he loves all of us through food and we continue that tradition.

So, how do we deal with our own grief? How do we move forward? What is our attitude and response towards our own grief? Is it one of hope and change or simply pure despondency?

I hate the phrase ‘You just have to move on.’ I would much rather move forward. If we are going to have hope and change and move forward, we all have to have meaning afterward. As David Kessler, one of the world’s foremost experts on grief and loss, an author and a trainer, who has trained, aid with compassion, to countless police, first responders, doctors, nurses, and the Red Cross Disaster teams said: ”Meaning is not in the horrible act, but is a personal, relative, takes time, not worth the cost, requires understanding, it is something to handle the loss, and only you can find your meaning.” No one else can find it for you. That meaning he calls the ‘Sixth Stage of Grief’ and he wrote a book about it entitled “Finding Meaning, The sixth Stage of Grief”.

I love TED Talks and I was struck by one given by Lucy Hone about resilient people dealing with loss. She said there are three things resilient people do. First, resilient people know that bad things happen. Second, resilient people are really good at choosing very carefully where they select their attention (she says they always turn towards the good). Third, resilient people decide to know if what I’m doing is helping or hurting me (that puts you in the drivers seat).

Let’s take these three points in order.

First, you all know that there is evil in the world. That’s a given. As Chris Stapleton, one of my favorite country singers and songwriters, wrote in ‘Broken Halos’; ‘don’t go asking Jesus why?’ Accept that it exists and try with all your energy and prayer, to lessen it in your life and the life of others.

Second, put all your attention on the good, in others, in life, especially in your family and keeping, as best you can, the commandments as Jesus expected us to do.

Third, earnestly pray that you are not hurting yourself by the decisions you are making, but are helping yourself and others.

There are a lot of verses in scripture comforting to the grieving, some I particularly like are from the Psalms, such as Psalm 34 verses 17-18: “The righteous cry and the Lord hears them and delivers them from all their troubles; The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit”; and Psalm 55 verse 22, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you: He will never let the righteous fall”, and Psalm 84 verses 10, 11 and 12, that we heard today, “For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in you.”

Resilient Christians trust in God, our creator, the one who always is in union with us.

Resilient Christians trust in the love of Jesus Christ the one who is the face of God to us and our redeemer.

Resilient Christians trust in The Holy Spirit for comfort and instruction, the one who sustains us, emboldens us, opens new windows of truth to us and challenges us to take our part in the ministry of God.

Are you a resilient Christian? If you are wondering at all about that, follow Jesus' lead when he says: 'Fear not, only believe'. - Amen