

"Christian Grieving"

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

November 9, 2014

22nd Sunday After Pentecost

Christian grieving: to some, it might sound like a contradiction in terms. If you are truly a Christian, you shouldn't be grieving. A Christian should be happy, not sad. When death comes calling, I've seen Christians desperately trying to keep a stiff upper lip and not grieve so they can prove that they still have a strong faith. Conversely, if you grieve, then you must not be a Christian. A person who grieves must not believe in God, some would say. I've seen some people observing a person grieving the death of a loved one and saying, "If he only he believed in God, he wouldn't have to feel so sad."

The fact of the matter, whether we are Christians or not Christians, we spend a lot of time trying to avoid grieving. A non-Christian will deny death by refusing to call death what it is. People will replace "death" with various euphemisms such as "passed, passed away, passed on" and so forth.

Some will deny death's coming, even at a death bed, choosing to pretend everything is all right instead of daring to say someone is going to die. If people DO admit the reality and nearness of death, they will try to put a positive spin on death, calling it a friend, a relief, or a dignified choice over which that person can have control.

Many people these days, especially in Montana, refuse to schedule times for grief or mourning over death, opting instead for a "celebration of life" in a tavern over a funeral in a church. The fate of those who have died also always have a positive spin. Without any authoritative evidence and based solely (it seems) on their wishful thinking, people will speak of their friends and relatives who have "passed on" to have "gone to a better place", "become the newest angel in heaven" or simply faded out of existence. Read the obituary section in the paper sometime to see if I'm telling the truth or not.

Christians sometimes try to deny grief as well. We say and do many of the same things which I just mentioned that unbelievers say and do. We say good things about death and dying and try to put positive spins on it, hoping such things will ease our pain.

As Christians, we sometimes add to this what I call “the guilt of faith.” We use our faith or accuse others with their faith as a reason not to grieve. Well meaning Christians will say well meaning (yet perfectly horrible) things at the time of death: “Well, it must have been God’s will that your mother died;” “Don’t feel sad, just believe in God;” “Don’t worry. Your faith will get you through this. Trust in Jesus and rejoice.” So, many of us, when faced with death, will struggle not to cry so we can show others that we really have faith. We end up feeling guilty if we dare to grieve when someone close does die. We end up, not only having the pain of a loved one’s death, but also having guilt for not having enough faith to be free from that pain.

This is all SO wrong on many counts. First, we have to understand what death is. It is not a welcomed friend for someone who has lived a long time. Death is not a relief for someone who is suffering. Death is not a dignified choice for someone with a terminal illness. Death is something bad – very bad.

When God created the world, it did not include death. God created us and all of humanity to live – to live forever. Death is an evil intruder into God’s good creation. Far from being a friend, the Bible calls death “the final enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26)

Death came into this world, not as a reward and relief for sufferers, but as a judgment and punishment for sinners, beginning with Adam and Eve, and extending down through the ages to our modern day era. Death is the wage we earn and deserve for sin. Death will come to all people because all have sinned. Death will come to you. Death will come to me.

Death is far worse than simply the beating of your heart stopping and the ceasing of your brain waves. That is only the first part of death. After that comes eternal death in hell which is far worse than anything we experience in our suffering here. Death is so horrible and repulsive. How can we

possibly put any euphemistic positive spin on it? How could we not mourn deeply for a friend or relative who dies?

Paul's words to the Thessalonians not only affirm that grieving is all right, but also show us the correct way to grieve. The congregation in Thessalonica was a very eager group of believers in Jesus who were eagerly awaiting His imminent return. However, they started to see friends, relatives, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ dying off. Like us, they were confused. Why is this happening? What does it mean? What has happened to these people who have died? Should we grieve for them or not?

Nowhere does Paul say it is wrong to grieve or sinful to grieve. Nowhere does Paul say or imply that grieving displays lack of faith or no faith at all. Rather, Paul says, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." Paul is not writing so they they may not grieve, but that they may not grieve *as others do*. In other words, other people grieve wrongly because they lack something in their grieving process. And what are others lacking which the Christians in Thessalonica had? They "have no hope", Paul says.

What gives Christians – those in Thessalonica and those gathered here today – hope when facing death? Paul says we have hope "since we believe that Jesus died and rose again." That makes all the difference in the world. Left alone to die alone, separated from God because of sin, we are hopeless.

However, Jesus died on the cross to remove the barrier that keeps us separated from God, namely, sin. His death, Paul reminds us and them, was the perfect and complete sacrifice and payment for all of our sins of thought, word, and deed, as well as all the sins of the entire world – past, present, and future. God has forgiven all of your sins and my sins for the sake of Jesus. You are no longer separated from Him.

Yet death would still be lurking in the shadows, waiting to suddenly swoop us away had it not been for the fact that Jesus rose again. Jesus has overcome death and come back to life. Our baptism has connected us to Christ – both to His death for sin and to His resurrection for life. What Jesus won and possesses becomes ours through this connection. The Word of God says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom. 6:5)

We grieve when death comes to take a loved one, but we grieve differently than other people. We grieve with hope. When we stand before the coffin of a loved one who has died in the faith, it is sad – real and true sadness for the present situation – but it is mingled with hope – real and true hope for the future. And it is more than we normally think. Sometimes, I think we believe that the Good News is only that our loved one’s soul is with the Lord. It is that, but it is so much more. We act as if we split the difference with death. Death gets our body, but God gets our soul.

Don’t settle for just that. There is coming a day when, not only the effects of sin are done away, but death itself will be defeated and destroyed. That’s what Paul is talking about in our text. There was apparently concern by some that those who died were gone and only those who were alive when Jesus came would share in His Kingdom. But Paul assures them and us that the Lord Himself will return from heaven with a loud shout, the voice of an archangel, and the sound of the trumpet of God. “And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”

Not only do our souls live on, but our bodies will be resurrected and perfected so that we might live eternally. Those who have gone before us in the faith and those who follow us in the faith will be caught up, body and soul, in the clouds to meet the Lord and always be with Him.

Paul says we are to “encourage one another with these words.” There is great encouragement here as we experience the death of loved ones. First, we are sad over death, but we do not ever fear death. Death is like a aging toothless lion which was once very powerful and dangerous, but whose

bark is now far worse than his bite. Death was once very powerful and dangerous until Jesus overcame death in His resurrection. Now death's bark attempts to scare us, but death's bite can never hurt us.

Second, we grieve over death and that is not wrong. Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. But we, as Christians, we grieve differently than those who are not Christians. We do not hide from the brutality and evil of death by trying to deny it, rename it, or put a positive spin on it, but we face death and grieve over death with hope. The modern day concept of "hope" is not much more than wishful thinking. Modern hope is uncertain at best and worthless at worst. Biblical hope is so much more certain. Some have suggested that Biblical hope should be understood as "promise". We grieve over death, not because it is the end, but we grieve with hope, with the promise from God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, that it is NOT over. The one who dies in faith lives on after her body has died and whose body will, in fact be resurrected from her grave and live forever with the Lord.

Thirdly, because of that hope, we live with a joy, even when experiencing the death of loved ones who die in the faith. This is not merely the feeling of happiness for death comes with deeply sad feelings. This is an attitude of deep and abiding joy because death comes with great promises for the Christian. Early Church Father, St. Augustine put it this way,

"And you should not grieve as the heathen do who have no hope because we have hope, based on the most assured promise, that as we have not lost our dear ones who have departed from this life, but have merely sent them ahead of us, so we also shall depart and shall come to that life where, more than ever, their dearness to us will be proportional to the closeness we shared on earth and where we shall love them without fear of parting." (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, X, p. 85)

As we begin the end of another church year and prepare for the end of all things, let us do so with repentance and grief: repentance over our sin and grief for those who have died. Yet, at the same time, let us do so with hope and joy: the hope, that is, the promise of resurrection from the dead for those who have died and the joy of our reunion with them and all who have shared our faith

in Christ to life everlasting where there will be no more sin, no more grief, and no more death forever and ever. Amen.