

Hope in the Midst of Grief

Today we are beginning our “Hope in the Midst of…” series of sermon and music. During our Visioning process, we had a team of people interviewing community stakeholders (other churches, non profits, school representatives, town leaders, and so forth) about what they are seeing in the wider community. And almost every single person we talked to named things like mental health challenges, addiction, trauma, grief, and this collective sense of loss as overwhelmingly pervasive in our community. Some even felt like we were living through two pandemics at the same time – COVID and the more invisible pandemic of mental health challenges. We also found that a number of people in our own congregation were personally affected and also passionate about wanting to do something to address these issues. So we formed a mental health team that is made up of Nancy Barber, Adria Hasha, Franny Hoey, Mary Riley, Matthew Larson, Carol Bowen, Mike Shaw, Mavis Anderson, and Phil Richenberg. This series is the result of the work of that team.

And part of our hope, the team’s hope is that we can begin to break the stigma around these topics – because even though we know they are pervasive, we also know there is still a stigma surrounding them. We hope we can be a community of support and love for anyone who is experiencing this challenges. And we hope that we can play a small part in helping people in our own congregation and beyond find hope in the midst of these challenges. And one of the ways we will do that is by hearing testimonies from people in our own congregation who have experienced these challenges and are willing to courageously and vulnerably share their own stories. I have asked each speaker to share two things:

- 1) What is your experience with the topic…and
- 2) Where do you find hope in the midst of that challenge.

And today, we start with grief. And our testimony comes from our Pastor Emeritus Jeff Johnson.

Jeff’s talk on Grief

First Congregational Church of Milton. 1/21/24

My wife Ann has been suffering with dementia leading into Alzheimers for 10 years now… known as “the long goodbye”.. She is now in a Memory Care Unit When I drive into the parking lot, I feel a deep sadness, and when I leave to go home, I tell her that I have to go, and her face falls. Her response gives me the sense that she is feeling abandoned. I hate it when this happens. It hurts both of us in different ways.

It’s not difficult to get her laughing, and when she does, how easy it is for me to feel close to the person I miss so much. But it doesn’t last very long. Other sinister forces are at work in her and they don’t let up. The Ann I miss so much isn’t coming back. I’ve been a bit surprised to find that there is a physical side to

this grief stuff. I really do ache. When I sit alone on the couch eating supper and watching a movie, my mind starts to play tricks on me. Perhaps it's trying to help in its own unique way. Because, you see, I could swear that I can see her out of the corner of my eye but even though I know this can't be true, I sometimes turn toward this image and...of course...there is no one there. Sometimes I talk to the sofa cushion anyway—it seems to help just a little. My therapist tells me that all of this is part of the way that my mind processes my deep sense of loss, and that dodging it or ignoring it only prolongs it.

The things that give me hope? The help of my ever present daughters, contact with my grandchildren, my therapist, my caregiver support group, my meditation life, my close friends, family, and colleagues, and meaningful work, and my tears... And watching, of all things, "Call the Mid-Wife." Why? Because it ALWAYS makes me cry, Once the tears start, I almost always wind up in a better place..

I am struck by how much wonderful support I actually have. (I am very fortunate.) It doesn't make life easy—but it does make grief bearable.

The famous Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis (who also wrote the Narnia books) wrote a book called *A Grief Observed* that is a collection of his honest and vulnerable reflections after his wife died of cancer. Like Jeff shared with us, C.S. Lewis reflected on not only the emotional side but also the physical side of grief.

In one essay, he writes,

"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be with me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me."

C.S. Lewis was speaking about his experience of the death of a loved one, but grief can be about any loss. Dr. Susan Block, a palliative care expert at McLean psychiatric hospital says that grief is the normal emotional response for humans over any loss where something that was deeply valued has now disappeared from your life. Grief can happen in response to the loss of:

Certainly a loved one...but also

A job

A marriage

One's health – a new diagnosis

An idea or a dream or a hope.

Grief affects us in so many ways – emotionally (feeling sad or anxious), physically (loss of appetite or an interest in doing things), socially (no longer having a companion to go to social events with), spiritually (existential questions about the goodness or even existence of God), and even practically (not knowing how to do something that your partner always did).

Grief is something we all experience and yet how we experience grief is unique to each of us. There's no one, right way to grieve. And you never have to justify your grief to anyone.

In our readings this morning, we see both King David and Jesus weeping. David was weeping over the death of his son Absalom. And if we were to keep reading, we'd see that not everyone thought it appropriate that David weep. You see, Absalom had rebelled against his father, he tried to assume the throne for himself...and he was almost successful. David and those loyal to him had fled Jerusalem earlier. As David regained his strength, he and his army re-entered the battle and Absalom was killed.

Absalom was both David's enemy and also his son. And for David, he never stopped being his son. So even though Absalom's death meant that David would be victorious, David did not feel victorious. Like I imagine most any parent who has experienced what has to be one of the worst pains imaginable – the death of a child – David wished it had been him and not Absalom who had died.

This didn't go over well with David's fighting men. They believed Absalom had made his decision. He had chosen his path. And had suffered the consequences. Why weep over him? But here's the thing, David wept over Absalom simply because he loved him and love is not something that has to be explained. David did not need to explain his love for his son nor did he need to explain his grief. And neither do we. Whatever or whoever it is that you grieve, you don't owe anyone an explanation. Grief, like love, happens to us. And your grief is yours – it doesn't have to be justified or explained.

And secondly, Jesus wept over the death of his friend Lazarus. Now some felt that Jesus' weeping wasn't terribly authentic because if Jesus had only come a few days before, perhaps he could have healed Lazarus. Like Jesus, so many are confronted with questions [or in Jesus' case, accusations] of guilt – could I have done something else, what did I miss, could I have saved her, saved him? Did I make the right decisions for the person I love? What did I do wrong?

And if you ever feel that way, or have ever been made to feel that way, remember that Jesus Christ himself was accused of that too. Try to offer yourself some grace. Try to be kind and gentle to yourself. Rarely are there easy answers as to how to best care for a loved one. Most of

the time, we are all simply doing the best we can and, when we're in the moment, we don't get the benefit of hindsight.

So where or how do we find hope in the midst of grief? And how can we be a community that offers hope and support for each other? I actually think the answer to the first question is found in how we answer the second.

Dr. Christopher M. Palmer, a psychiatrist at McClean hospital, led a webinar that I watched in preparation for this series. And he discussed the difference between clinical depression and being sad because of a hard or difficult situation – like the loss of something we hold dear. The first, we'll talk about in a few weeks when we discuss mental health challenges, but for the second – sadness that is situational, Dr. Palmer said that what someone who is grieving needs more than anything else is loving, supportive community. It's people who are willing to show up and be there for you.

And how we show up is so important:

In 2014, clinical psychologist Susan Silk and her friend Barry Goldman shared in the most read [column of the LA Times](#) for the entire year their "Ring Theory" of grief and trauma. Here's how Silk explains it: "Draw a circle. This is the center ring. In it, put the name of the person who is grieving. Now draw a larger circle around the first one. In that ring put the name of the person next closest to the situation. Repeat the process as many times as you need to. In each larger ring put the next closest people. Parents and children before more distant relatives. Intimate friends in smaller rings, less intimate friends in larger ones.

The rules of Ring Theory are pretty simple and can be explained in four words, 'Comfort In. Dump Out.' Here is how it works. Whoever is in the centermost of the rings gets to whine, complain, cry and vent as much as they want and need to. The people in the other rings can also express their feelings and concerns. However, the one distinction is with whom they can process those emotions. That is where the concept of "dumping out", comes into play. The people surrounding the person in the innermost circle express their negative feelings and anxieties only to people in the larger rings. It's not that you are not allowed to grieve or feel, it is just that venting about your pain to someone who is already feeling their pain deeply is not helpful to you or them."

I first read this article when it came out and it remains one of the most impactful newspaper articles I've read and still informs how I try to offer pastoral care when I sit with people who are grieving. What I find most helpful about the article is that it both acknowledges that most of us, to varying degrees, carry some form of grief with us while reminding us that in any given situation the focus must be on the one who is most impacted in that moment. I think we all, with the best of intentions, have this tendency to want to relate to someone, but that's not really how to care for someone who is grieving. Because even if someone has experienced something similar to what I've experienced does not necessarily mean their grief journey will be the same as mine.

In her incredible book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and other Lies I've Loved* about her unexpected cancer diagnosis, Kate Bowler offers some very practical tips for what to say to be a healing presence with someone who is grieving that pairs nicely with Silk and Goldman's Ring Theory. Kate says you can't go wrong with these simple questions and statements:

- 1) "Can I bring you food?"
- 2) "You are a beautiful person." Or "Your [loved one] was a beautiful person/hero/incredible human being/etc."
- 3) "Can I give you a hug?"
- 4) "That sounds so hard. I'm so sorry."
- 5) Be willing to sit in silence...even if it's awkward.

I would add a sixth. Be willing to receive anger without being defensive and especially without feeling the need to defend God if the person is angry at God. God's big enough to take it. When the unimaginable happens, people need to be able to express their hurt in the form of anger. Being a community that offers hope in the midst of grief means that, here, in this place, you don't have to hide or censure what you're feeling.

Our very first priority as a congregation is to be a place where everyone "Belongs," and that means that all people are welcome here. But it also means that you are welcome here in whatever emotional state you find yourself in.

You belong here when you are grieving and angry.

You belong here when you are grieving and in denial.

You belong here when you are grieving and feeling guilty.

You belong here when you are grieving and feel like you're all alone.

You belong here when you are grieving and sad and don't want to put on a fake smile.

Friends, the way we can do our small part in being a community of healing that can offer hope in the midst of grief is to simply say to every single person we encounter, you belong here and you are free to be exactly who you are in whatever emotional space you find yourself in. You belong and you are loved.

As C.S. Lewis went on to say in his book on grief, "This is one of the miracles of love: It gives a power of seeing through its own enchantments and yet not being disenchanted."

May we offer that gift of love and belonging to one another always, and especially in times of grief.