
Living with Grief

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Proper 20 – Year C

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

A few months ago, my colleague Carolynne Williams decided to reduce her hours, so she could spend more time enjoying life and using her Delta perks. As a result of that transition, I was named Canon for Pastoral Care. When I told my family that I would be taking on this responsibility they started laughing: You? Canon for Pastoral Care? What are they thinking?

For those who might feel that way, let me assure you that Dean Candler has surrounded me with an amazing team, and we have added Deacon Juan for pastoral reinforcement.

I am happy to report the pastoral care department is beginning this programmatic year with a number of offerings on grief and suffering. On Wednesday, Dr. Bill Harkins kicked off our monthly Lunch and Learn series with a presentation on grief and loss. In a few weeks, Meg Moye of the Cathedral Counseling Center will offer a grief group for those who have lost a loved one. For the next few weeks, Canon Smelser will be offering an End of Life Decisions class. And if that isn't enough, I am devoting an entire Sunday morning series to teaching about ways to care for those who are grieving and suffering. I want to explore the question—How do we live with grief?

So, it is no surprise that I am drawn to Jeremiah's words: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick."

I believe at some point in our lives we all speak Jeremiah's words. For me, it was the summer of 2005, serving as a hospital chaplain at Texas Children's Hospital. One evening, I was only paged three times, and each of those calls was to baptize a dying infant. I had served in that hospital all summer, so I was no stranger to difficult situations, but having to watch three children die in one evening was too much. After the third death, I remember going back to my room and speaking Jeremiah's words: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick."

You too have spoken these words. Perhaps you lost a spouse, a child, a close family member or friend. Maybe your marriage is ending in divorce, or you are facing a difficult medical diagnosis. Jeremiah's words are real.

So, what does Jeremiah tell us about living with grief?

Jeremiah tells us that grief is something that happens to us all, rich and poor, king or priest. Jeremiah spends his life trying to get Jerusalem to look at the cause of their pain and suffering. Jeremiah wants the people to confront their pain instead of trying to avoid it.

Guess what? No one listens to Jeremiah. As a matter of fact, they get so tired of hearing him that they throw him into a cistern. Thankfully, a passing eunuch comes to Jeremiah's rescue. When the Babylonians capture Jerusalem and force the people into exile, someone thought it would be a good idea to bring Jeremiah on the road trip.

Well, that turned out to be a horrible idea, because Jeremiah kept asking them to address the pain in their lives. It turns out that isn't a popular message while walking through the desert in exile, so legend has it that they got so tired of Jeremiah

they stoned him to death.

Jeremiah's message is important. Jeremiah wants you to name the grief you are experiencing. Jeremiah wants you to address the loss and suffering in your life.

In his book, *Turn My Mourning into Dancing*, theologian Henri Nouwen draws upon Jeremiah's message. Nouwen talks about the importance of accepting pain and not denying it; of turning toward the pain instead of avoiding it.

Nouwen says that we try to go around our pain, or rise above it; the best way to live with grief is to go toward it and journey through it! Yet, the idea of turning toward our pain and going through it doesn't come naturally, but it is the way of the cross. After all, Christians arrive at Easter Sunday by going through Good Friday.

So, you live with grief by addressing it, by going through it, and trusting that God will be present in that holy journey.

Now, this all sounds nice in theory, but when reality sets in and we are confronted with grief, we do everything in our power to avoid it.

Let me share a brief story that makes this point:

I grew up canoeing on the Hiawassee River.

Every year, I would have clean run until I got to one of the last rapids on the river; it was called "The Funnel." For those of you who don't know the Hiawassee, imagine a large river coming to a funnel. As you approach the funnel there are a series of rocks and rapids.

The first time I went down that rapid, I started panicking and did what felt natural. I took my paddle out of the water, grabbed onto the side of the boat, and braced myself for the oncoming danger.

Doing what feels natural isn't the best move in a canoe: When you take your paddle out of the water and brace for danger, you end up hitting the rock and leaning toward the current. Thus, your boat ends up taking in water and your boat capsizes, leaving you to swim the rapid.

The next few years, I would try taking different routes to avoid going through the center of the rapid.

There were the years where I tried going river left, but each year the bow would catch a rock and hit the current with such force the canoe would capsize and I was back in the water.

The worst year, was when I tried going river right and got sucked into another current that ended up pinning me against a tree, holding on for dear life.

Eventually, I was able to pull myself up on the tree, but as fate would have it, the current was so strong my swimsuit got pulled down to my ankles, so there I was mooning everyone rafting downstream.

I spent most of my youth trying to get through that stupid rapid without swimming.

Finally, one year I decided to do the unthinkable, I listened to the wise voices—I didn't take my paddle out of the water, nor did I try to hold on when things got scary, nor did I try to go river left or right to avoid the danger. Instead, I went straight toward the rocks, right into the midst of the rapids. Yes, the waves were big and the water was fast, but I got through to the other side.

When I experience grief I remind myself of that rapid, because paddling river left and river right got me nowhere. The best way to deal with grief is to paddle through the middle.

Imagine what our lives would be like if we followed Jeremiah's advice and turned toward our grief?

I imagine we would be able to tell others about encountering Jesus along the road of one of life's difficult journeys. I imagine the cross would take on a new meaning; it would be more than something we identify with or wear; it would be something we have personally encountered. I imagine that we would be able to stand before others (like Jesus), and point

toward our scars, and assure them that nothing can separate us from resurrection and new life.

Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

I imagine that Jeremiah asked this question knowing that someone would eventually listen, someone would dare to journey through grief and come to discover the answer. The African American Spiritual says, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul."

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