

SAYING GOODBYE

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

The hospital emergency room was busy. There was a sudden torrential rain in the city and water began to rise rapidly in the streets. The sewers began to back up; gutters overflowed, and soon great rivers of water were everywhere that dry land and dry road once were. As darkness fell, an ambulance pulled into the emergency room driveway. It had a woman on a stretcher; she was in her sixties. Apparently, she had been returning home after taking an older friend on an errand when she became trapped in the car by flooding waters. Her car stalled and was unable to move. At long last there was someone to help; someone to pull the car to safety from that water that was so high it was even above the door sills. Afterward as the woman was pulled to a drier area, her friend could tell, and the others checking her could tell, that she was not doing well. She was having chest pains; and she was having trouble breathing. The whole event had been alarmingly hard on her. So 911 was called and she was taken in this ambulance to the hospital. A chaplain was on duty in that emergency room. She began to tell the chaplain what happened and told the story of how the car was filling with water and how hard it was for her to deal with it. Then she got to a point where she broke down and wept. Through the tears she told the chaplain: "You know, my husband died one year ago, and this was the first time I had tried to drive a car since he died." The chaplain's heart was filled with compassion. The woman continued, "I have felt so helpless without him; he did everything for me; I just can't get him out of my mind." She even went on through the next few minutes and said, "Sometimes I even see him sitting in his favorite chair, and I hear his voice at night."

The woman was experiencing a grieving process; a process through which all of us go at one time or another. At some deep emotional level, she could hardly accept

that her husband was gone; she was struggling to let go, even a year later. But grief is a part of life. We have transitions and losses. We let go of things throughout our lives. We experience grief in many forms, but it takes its toll on us, physically, emotionally, spiritually. It's painful to lose someone in our lives; someone who has been so very special to us. And it hurts when a relationship has had to be severed when we move from one situation in life to another. Where there is loss; where there is hurt, we face those issues. It is the essential task of human development to know we will face losses and have to deal with grief. In the Bible we have a rather abrupt account of what happened to Moses when he died, and how he was not going to get to the Promised Land. But there are other stories in the New Testament that describe death and resurrection; they remind us that something new can grow even from something, or someone, that died.

The woman in the emergency room was experiencing a time of anxiety and loss. She hadn't been able to grasp the hope that there could be life beyond her relationship; that there could be new life, even as she cherished the memory of her husband. She would have to risk, as all of us have to risk, trying to make it on her own without her husband there. It was not easy. At one time or another, each of us may have trouble letting go of someone or something. We cling to the past because it is comfortable and comforting; we can be too frightened to explore relationships of change and growth. We cling to relationships that have long died because we don't see how we can make it without them. Some worry about the soul of their departed loved one, wondering if they will meet up in eternal life again. God's grace will see us through our grief if we seek out the Lord, and seek out others who have also experienced a loss. Our steadfast Lord Jesus is there; embracing you and encouraging you, waiting for you to call his name and say, "I need you walk with me for the living of these days."

Whatever loss you've experienced—a mother or a father; a grandparent; a child; a spouse; or someone else—most of us have experienced the death of someone. Let's face it: it is hard to let go of cherished loved ones. It is difficult, difficult work. We go through the memories that fill our minds and the activities that were part of our lives. There are even rituals that we find ourselves doing: picking up the phone to call your mother when you sheepishly realize she is not at the other end of the line anymore; doing the weekly ritual of sending a note or a text to a loved one only to remember that they are not there to receive it. We find ourselves stuck with rituals that have lost their connection.

Thankfully for us, the apostle Paul knew that people had trouble grieving, and he wrote some of the most helpful words about death in his first letter to the Corinthians and his first letter to the Thessalonians. In First Corinthians 15, we are reminded that death is a mystery, but that *death is swallowed up in victory*. And Paul expounds on those words: when the trumpet sounds, “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ... death is swallowed up in victory.”

I have observed a lot of funerals. And I'm here to tell you that in my observations, no matter how poorly you think you have handled your grief, people who have no faith will do an even poorer job of coping. Without faith, people who say goodbye to a loved one are completely lost; almost without hope. What do they think happens in death if there is not life beyond death? Is just a terrible finality? I've done funerals for peripheral Christians and even non-Christians who just want an officiant to “say the words” over their husband or wife. But it's not the same. It's not the same because they have not digested what faith is, and they don't know what hope is about, and they have no understanding of an afterlife where we might meet one another

again. So no matter how hard death of a loved one is to you, no matter how poorly you think you have coped with it, you did it far better than many others.

In First Thessalonians 4, Paul gives us a gem. In these verses he tells us these tremendously comforting words: *We want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad as are those who have no hope.* He goes on: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him.* We're reassured our loved ones who followed Jesus are with Jesus after death. The Good Shepherd has our loved ones in his capable and loving hands. And as for the other parts of the passage, the parts that baffle people like verses 15-18, its message is a comfort to Christians. Those who die first will be resurrected first in a spiritual resurrection; there is no holding pattern. *The dead in Christ will rise first.* Your Christian loved ones have joined Jesus when they died, they are not molding in the ground waiting for Christ's second coming. You shall meet again in heaven. Then, as Paul says, *then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; so we will be with the Lord forever. Comfort one another with these words.* That's what it's saying: that we will have a chance to have a new communion with our Lord and with our loved ones.

So in times of loss we are called to do at least three things:

First, remember. Who was this person? Remember them, think about them, and be among those who go to grieving persons and say, "Tell me about him," or "Tell me about her." Don't hold it in if you are grieving. If no one comes to you who offers to hear from your stories, then YOU come to me, or to a counselor, or to the Caring Friends, or to someone. TELL SOMEONE ABOUT THE PERSON YOU LOVED.

If you are the listener, let grieving people share, telling you who she or he was to them. Really do it. *Remember the person.*

Second, rejoice. Some people forget the rejoicing in the grieving process. What did he or she do? How did they show their love? Think about what the person did for you, or for the family or the community, whatever it might be. Rejoice in your remembering; rejoice in the time you had; rejoice in what you shared. I once found some greeting cards that had this sentiment on them; I bought them all and have never seen them again. They said: “May you rejoice in life, rejoice in love, and rejoice in the Lord. Give thanks to God for the time you spent together; give the troubling times back to God; imagine dropping those sands of time in the river that flows by the throne of God.

Third, regroup. Regroup. Since the time of the Old Testament and before, people have told stories, and we continue to tell stories about our faith and the faithful people around us. We then consider: “What good lessons or practices have we learned from them? What things do I do or say that I picked up from the one who has died?” You can offer a legacy by *incorporating the lessons you learned from your loved one’s life into your own.* They, in a sense, can live on through the way they have influenced you. By doing that—regrouping and incorporating their best advice and best qualities into the things you are doing—you can have a living memorial which also honoring God, who invites you to move on from an eternal life of grieving.

With few exceptions, Christians handle death better than others in part because of our constant teaching about Heaven and the resurrection to eternal life. One day we

may meet our loved ones in the air, in the clouds, or when go through the gates of New Jerusalem.

Let us pray: Dear God we don't do very well in coping with death and letting go of our loved ones. Nevertheless, thank you for showing us ways our souls can rest easy. Help us to do our best with the knowledge that even now, your Holy Spirit is near us; we are not alone. Amen.

February 20, 2022