

PROPERLY GRIEVING

While I was walking our dog Daisy on Sunday afternoon, I happened to spot another couple down the street doing the same thing. Normally I run into this couple two or three times a week walking their dog around 6:45 a.m. On those early mornings when I see this couple with their dog usually the husband is just wearing a sweatshirt rather than a winter coat even when the temperatures are well below zero. On Sunday afternoon the temperature was around zero and I was surprised to see him wearing a warm coat. When I caught up to them, I said, "I am confused. Normally I see you in a sweatshirt on the coldest of days but here you are today wearing a winter jacket. You are confusing me." We all laughed about his typical attire on cold, winter days, and his wife agreed with me completely. I used this as a conversation starter to ask what they had planned for the rest of the day. I knew they must have had something planned because this man is a contractor, and he usually works seven days a week. It is odd to see him home on a Sunday afternoon.

They shared how they were going to her sister's house for supper to celebrate her dad's birthday. When I asked how old her dad was, they shared with me that he had passed away four years ago. They then proceeded to tell me how they have done this every year since their father's passing. The family gets together on his birthday for dinner, and then they watch some of his favourite movies. This family has found doing this every year very healing in dealing with their grief. Knowing a little bit about grief as a pastor who has done a lot of funerals, I commended them on keeping this tradition up and dealing with their grief in such a healthy way. There were no expressions of sadness on their faces as we talked, but rather excitement looking forward to their annual tradition to recognize their loss and honour their father's memory.

This encounter made me contemplate the amount of grief people have experienced over these past few years. So many people have lost loved ones during these past two years, and perhaps have not had the chance to properly grieve because they had to postpone the funeral or celebration of life. Grief is not only experienced when a loved one dies. We experience grief when we experience declining health, retire from work, lose a job, have a friend move away, or go through a divorce. During these past two years dealing with COVID, we have also experienced grief due to lost opportunities, missed

celebrations and other things that have been taken away from us. Grief is a feeling we experience whenever we go through a loss of any significant kind. A lot of people are ashamed to grieve thinking it is a sign of weakness. Other people are uncomfortable grieving and try to keep busy so they can avoid dealing with their feelings. This approach may work for the short term but eventually those feelings associated with grief catch up with us.

I think it is important for us to recognize that we have all experienced grief in certain ways due to the various losses that have occurred to us during COVID. Recognizing this reality will be a starting point for us to be healed from the losses we have endured. The next step toward healing is not to be ashamed to grieve. Jesus was not ashamed of acknowledging that He needed to grieve after a difficult loss in His life. Shortly after John the Baptist was killed in prison, his disciples came to share with Jesus the news about his death. The news hit Jesus hard because John the Baptist was not only a cousin, but also was one of the only people who knew His true identity. Matthew's gospel tells us that as soon as Jesus heard the news, He left in a boat to go to a remote area to be alone. Jesus was not ashamed to admit that He needed time to grieve the loss of John the Baptist. As we see, He gave Himself the freedom to grieve this significant loss.

It is so important for us to follow Jesus' example to give ourselves permission to deal with some of the grief we are experiencing because of our losses over these past few years. We might need to do so in a quiet place alone like Jesus did, or perhaps in the presence of a dear friend or family member. We can also seek the presence of Jesus to help us deal with our feelings and emotions as He has gone through this experience Himself. If Jesus was not ashamed to acknowledge His grief and pain than why should we? We should have confidence to follow His example to deal with grief properly. If we do so, then we will come out of it healthier and stronger. We see this happen with Jesus after He took time to grieve. Matthew tells us that a large crowd eventually caught up with Jesus after His time of solitude. Jesus was not angry with the crowd, but rather showed compassion for them and showed it by healing the sick among them. He also showed more compassion for them by feeding the multitude of people later that day with the five loaves and two fish. Jesus shows us here what can happen when we properly acknowledge our grief and deal with it.

We may still have feelings of grief like Jesus did, but we can come out of it in a healthier way by still being able to show compassion toward others and by doing the work we are called to by God. I think this is the way Jesus wants us to come out of the grief we have experienced during this pandemic. By following His example of admitting our need to grieve, with His help we can emerge from this in a healthier way by being compassionate toward others and blessing ourselves and others in the work God calls us to do. We see the proof of this in the family whose father died four years ago. They have identified their grief and have given themselves the freedom to come together on his birthday each year to acknowledge their loss. Some people might question why they are still doing this every year. This annual ritual has obviously helped them to keep smiling and to bond as a family despite their loss. We have all experienced grief these past few years. Let's experience Jesus' model of healing from it so we don't lose our compassion and calling.

Keep Safe and God Bless

Pastor Dean