

"THE FACES OF GRIEF"

INTRODUCTION

The late Halford Luccock of Yale Divinity School use to say that a sermon should either "afflict the comfortable or comfort the afflicted".

The majority of sermons preached recently from the pulpit of this church have followed the first part of Luccock's advice and have been designed to "afflict the comfortable". And this, because your ministers feel that, in general, we preach to a comfortable congregation, to people whose consciences need to be poked and prodded, whose horizons need to be broadened, whose priorities need to be evaluated in terms of the great issues we face in society today.

But on occasion, it is good and wise for us to follow the second part of Luccock's advice and speak that word of reassurance, or of encouragement, or of hope and comfort recognizing that some are drawn to worship on a Sunday out of some deep inner need or seeking guidance for some problem with which they may be doing battle behind the closed doors of their life. Today is one of those Sunday when we shall follow the second path, and in so doing I have chosen to speak on the emotion of grief.

DEVELOPMENT

Every person - at one time or another in his life - experiences the emotion of grief. It comes in assorted shapes and sizes - all the way from a child's sorrow at a broken toy or an uprooted residence to an adult's anguish over the loss of a loved one. And that loss is not always through death.

For instance, last night, between eight and nine o'clock, I baptized three infants in a small, cold, antiseptic room adjacent to the maternity ward of New York Hospital - a room where hospital supplies are kept - three infants born this past week to three young girls all of whom are unmarried. As I stood there with a white jacket over my suit and a protective white mask over my mouth baptizing these three beautiful babies with their mothers present there in the room, I couldn't help but think of the deep emotional anguish and inner turmoil those young girls must be going through knowing that this moment was probably one of the last moments for them to hold their own child.
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Sometimes grief is shared sorrow over another person's suffering. Sometimes it is a sense of national mourning, as when a Kennedy or a King is murdered. When we talk about grief, I should suppose that most of us have had some involvement with that emotion, and we know that as long as we live and love, we can expect to encounter grief.

This kind of hurting of the heart is one badge of our humanity. The animals do not share our capacity for grief. To be sure, a dog or a horse can be sensitive to the loss of a mate or a master, but this does not approach the depth or the length of human grief. To be a person means to have a mind that can remember, a conscience that can be disturbed, and a heart that can be hurt. This is simply part of the human situation, and we do well to face the fact that precisely because we are human, there is no escaping this emotion of grief.

The sense of this sermon is that grief wears many faces, and perhaps if we recognize some of her different expressions, we shall better be able to deal with our own grief and to help others with their grief.

Suppose we consider then several of the faces of grief.

ONE FACE: GUILT

The face of grief can involve some measure of guilt. Now we seldom put this into words, but perhaps we should. One of the reasons that we hurt so much at the time of a death of a loved one is that suddenly we may be haunted by the recollection of our frailties and our failures in relation to that loved one, and by the knowledge that it is too late to make amends.

Catherine Marshall recalled that soon after the sudden death of her famed preacher-husband, she felt the anguish of remorse at the remembrance of a mood of exasperation and of anger that she had unleashed on her husband the previous Sunday before his death. As later she wrote about it, she said, "I told my mother of the episode and verbally whipped myself - 'How could I have been like that? What on earth got into me? I'm supposed to be a woman - not a child. How could I have been so immature, so disgustingly petty?'"

The chances are that all of us who have walked through the valley of grief will recognize to some degree the scenery. Part of our suffering is remorse, as we recall deeds and misdeeds, words and silences, moods and manners that we would give much to cancel and correct. There can be guilt in our grief.

Two things that can be said about this factor of guilt in our grief. For one thing, the recognition of the guilt-potential in grief might encourage us to reduce that potential in our relationships with the living. Somebody has said that if we knew the world were coming to an end in five minutes, we would jam the telephone circuits to say to someone: "I love you". No minister stays long in a parish without realizing how often the world does come to an end for a person without even five minutes' notice. There is food for thought as well as food for the soul in the words of that old prayer:

"Help us to love each other more because
the days of loving are so short....."

The chances are that there is less guilt in grief when we live by that prayer!

But something more needs to be said, because even among the tallest and the best, guilt is present in grief. Its presence needs to be acknowledged and analyzed. We do need to remember that we have ambivalent feelings toward those we love - and that they have had the same feelings toward us - that there can be irritation and anger, even within the framework of love - and that we need not chastise ourselves, as later on Catherine Marshall realized she was doing, over some remembered mood and moment of exasperation or anger.

And most of all - as Christians we can bring our sense of guilt to a gracious God who accepts and forgives us. There are many things about the miracles in the New Testament that I do not understand, but I do get the message that so often when a person could surrender his sense of guilt in a spirit of repentance, then Jesus would say: "Your sins are forgiven you" - and that was the key to wholeness and healing in that person's life. And I get the message that something of that giving up of guilt is involved in the miracle of comfort and the re-ordering of a broken life. And maybe something of that is involved in Jesus' word: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted".

A SECOND FACE: LOVE

But now a second face of grief is love. So much of the pain of bereavement is the price of love. And painful though it is, we should hardly wish to forego the love which is involved. Phillips Brooks said something like that in a letter of sympathy to a friend:

"We do not want to lose our grief, because our grief is bound up with our love, and we could not cease to mourn without being robbed of our affections"

Dr. Sockman reminds us, in one of his books, of an old Greek legend about a woman who came down to the River Styx to be ferried across to the region of departed spirits. The boatman reminded her that it was her privilege to drink of certain waters that would enable her to forget the life she was leaving. Eagerly she said, "I will forget how I have suffered". "And" added the boatman, "remember too that you will forget how you have rejoiced". The woman said, "I will forget my failures" "Yes" replied the boatman, "And also your victories". She continued, "I will forget how I have been hated" "And also how you have been loved". Then she paused to consider the whole matter, and the end of the legend is that she left the liquid untasted, preferring to retain the memory even of sorrow and failure than to give up the memory of life's loves and joys.

The point is that whenever people form friendships, enter into marriage, bring children into the world, they are entering into love relationships which carry the price-tags of hurt, pain, and grief. There are the little griefs when a son or a daughter goes away to school, or when a friend moves far away, when a loved one goes through a particular painful experience or problem. There are also the greater griefs that death can mean. But grief is another name for love - and you cannot have one without the other. Grief and love are intertwined and interlined.

Years ago, the 17 year old daughter of William Allen White and his wife was killed in a freak accident. He wrote some words later on that have meant much to many of us. Let me share them with you:

"Mrs. White and I are standing on our feet, realizing that the loss is heavy and the blow is hard, but not beating our hands against the bars and asking why. On our books Mary is a net gain. She was worth so much more than she cost, and she left so much more behind than she took away that we are flooded with joyous memories and cannot question either the goodness of God or the general decency of man".

Sometimes - in our rebellion - we do question the goodness of God and the decency of man, but the main thrust of that statement is a magnificent affirmation of the worth of love in life, even the face of the cost of grief.

It's a good moment when a person can stand above the fog of grief to give thanks for the love that caused him the grief. This is what Tennyson was doing in his memorial lines to his friend Arthur Hallam:

"'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all"

FORWARD LOOK OF HOPE AND HELPFULNESS

One other thing beyond the face of guilt and the face of love for us to consider.

For the Christian, grief should also wear a forward look of hope and helpfulness.

Remember several years ago when Senator and Mrs. Percy went through that terrible experience of losing a twin daughter - how she was brutally murdered. Senator Percy relayed a message through a mutual friend to the Robert Kennedys that their letter of condolence had brought special comfort to the Percys. And when the friend delivered the message, Robert Kennedy was touched, nodded slowly and said: "We've had more experience...."

There is the hint that the experience of grief should enrich and enable a person to perform some special ministry with his life. Recently I heard someone use the slang expression, "Good grief" - and I stopped to think about it. What an unusual combination of words - and yet there is a sense in which it is true. "Good grief" - the sort of thing suggested in this more technical definition of grief by Edgar Jackson:

"Grief is the emotion that is involved in the work of mourning, whereby a person seeks to disengage himself from the demanding relationship that has existed and to re-invest his emotional capital in new and productive direction for the health and welfare of his future life in society".

....the worst of thing that Thornton Wilder was talking about in that poetic line "In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve". The sort of thing that St. Paul was affirming in his words: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him".

Think about it sometime. Are not some of the really good and great people that you know people who have grown through their grief? And though in the immediacy of grief, we cannot see how it can be so for us, we should keep open to the possibility that it might be so, and at least we could pray with the poet:

"Keep me from bitterness. It is so easy
To nurse sharp bitter thoughts each dull, dark hour.
Against self-pity, Man of sorrows, defend me,
With thy deep sweetness and thy gentle power
And out of all this hurt of pain and heartbreak
Help me to harvest a new sympathy
For suffering human kind, a wiser pity
For those who lift a heavier cross with Thee"

Once in this parish, sickness struck in a home, and without much notice, a loved one died. The next Sunday the family was in church in normal fashion, singing the hymns, affirming their faith. Some former members happened to be back with us that Sunday, and knowing the circumstances and the parents of the girl that had died, made this comment to me later on: "There were three sermons this morning - the sermon spoken from the pulpit, the sermon sung by the choir, and the sermon silently preached by that family".

It doesn't mean for a moment that we always have to be stoic about our grief - or that we must pretend to feel something we do not feel, or that we can never shed tears or feel despair. But it does mean that the Christian trusts the same loving power that turned the cross from a sign of torture into a sign of triumph, that he trusts the same loving power to gradually guide his grief into something of meaning and ministry. It does mean that the lights begin to come on behind that - at first incredible - Beatitude, as one translation has it: "How happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort". Or as another translation puts it: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforters".

LET US PRAY O Thou, with whom we have talked of grief, send us out with a quiet mind, a loving heart, and a courageous soul - Tho who art the healing behind the wounds and scars of life, and the light behind the shadows of darkness. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen