

"THE PROBLEM OF GRIEF"

TEXT: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33)

INTRODUCTION

Several weeks ago one of the members of our parish made a comment to me at the coffee hour with which I agree regarding grief. She said that in this modern age in which we live with its rapid tempo of life a person is not given an opportunity to grieve. She was speaking out of her own experience, I'm sure, for it was a little over two years ago that I conducted the funeral service for her husband. She indicated that she would like to have me deal with the subject of grief some Sunday morning in a sermon. Certainly this is a subject to which a minister might well give thought, and so our topic this morning has to do with the problem of grief.

It's a somber subject, of course, perhaps too somber for this beautiful June morning. There's a line in Tennyson's "In Memoriam" that goes like this -

"Never morning wore....

To evening, but some heart did break....."

and who knows when you may be forced to face the burden of sudden bereavement? Moreover, it is possible that there are those who do not see the beauty of this day because past grief is shutting out the sunshine. In looking for light upon our darkness we go back to a text from the lips of Jesus:

"In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer;
I have overcome the world".

A FACT OF LIFE

To begin with, our Christian faith would suggest that we must learn to accept grief as one of the facts of life. There is a false way of looking at things which would have us believe that life is all sweetness and light, and that any trouble which intrudes upon our happiness is not real and has no place in the scheme of things. We need to be reminded that grief is a very real emotion. There is no way you can shuffle the cards and deal it out. It is there, and it is there to stay; and the part of wisdom is to see it, and to accept it and not to deny its presence.

This modern world in which we live doesn't provide a person with much of an opportunity to grieve and this is not altogether good. I think we do a disservice to people when we try to act as though nothing has happened, and to create the impression that life is the same and things are back to normal. Life is not the same and things are not back to normal for the person who has suffered a loss. So then in dealing with the problem of grief, the first step is to look upon it as something of a very real emotion, to learn to accept it as something that is bound to come.

THE NATURE OF THE EXPERIENCE

Then the second step lies in seeking to understand the nature of the experience.

Our doctor friends can help us by pointing out reactions which are altogether normal, and so make us willing to be patient with the slow healing process of time. I remember counselling with a woman who had lost her husband. She told me she had accepted the loss, but that her problem lay in having no interest in life. Later on in reading a book on the subject of grief, I discovered that disinterestedness in life is altogether normal and to be expected. It made me wish I had known that fact at

that time for it would have helped her. As one expert puts it:

(POINT YANT) "We should anticipate these stages in our emotional convalescence: unbearable pain, poignant grief, empty days, resistance to consolation, disinterestedness in life, gradually giving way under the healing of the sunlight of love, friendship and social challenge, to a pattern of action and the acceptance of the irresistible challenge of life"

Another characteristic of grief so common as to be mentioned by the doctors, is that often grief is accompanied by intense feelings of guilt. The sorrowing person blames himself for not giving the deceased proper care during a period of illness, or failure in some obligation, or for being responsible in some way for the cause of death. You would know how real is the anguish if you have ever been with a person at such a time, and seen the look of agony on his face, and heard him say, "Oh - if only I had done this or that, it might not have happened". The reminder that you were never consciously negligent and that you always did the best you know, plus the remembrance that a sense of guilt is often a characteristic of grief, will help lessen the burden.

The doctors also tell us that it is important that grief be allowed to express itself. It is an emotion and if it is bottled up and not allowed to come out it will cause a nervous restiveness and ultimately do physical damage. Rabbi Liebman puts it like this:

"When we have the loss of a dear one, we should allow our hearts full leeway in the expression of their pain.....after all, we were given tear ducts to use for just such hours of darkness".

And as some one has put it, "Tears wash the eyes and afterward we see much better".

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

"In the world" said Jesus, "ye shall have tribulation".

In the light of that fact, we should first of all accept and then try to understand the nature of the experience. Jesus does not stop there, however; he goes on to say this other thing: "But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world". Having made allowance for the minus that is in life, he suggests that there is a plus and he would have us accentuate the positive. When the first shock of grief is past, it is right to begin to think about the plus. (EFF)

We should remember that whatever we lose, we can and should be grateful for what we have already had. I once read somewhere of what this particular truth meant to Dr. Albert W. Beaven of Rochester. He said that his seven year old little girl died and that he and Mrs. Beaven seemed unable to overcome their grief. There were so many things around the house which reminded them of her - her room, her playthings, the vacant chair at the table, and whenever they saw these things they were reminded of their loss. He said that their grief was leading them further and further into gloom, and he realized that something would have to be done to preserve their health. Somehow he managed to get hold of this truth and he said to his wife:

"Instead of thinking about what we have lost, let's begin to think of what we have possessed. We have had seven years of joy from this little girl's life, and nothing that has happened can take that away from us".

And so from then on the things that reminded them of their child were made to speak of what they had possessed instead of what they had lost and on that ladder they climbed out of grief into gladness.

NOT LOST Now there is a fourth fact which must be considered and which makes all the difference in the world for the Christian. Remember this that if you have lost one whom you love, he is not lost. If this is really God's world, then we are under his care whether we live or whether we die. Much as we miss those we love, we can rejoice that they have found their true home in the love and keeping of God, Our Father. As Marcus Aurelius put it: "It is pleasant to die, if there be gods; and sad to live, if there is none".

Here is a man who lost his wife and who wrote something of his experience for us in the Reader's Digest. He says this:

"Let me tell you what the doctor who attended my wife did for me as I stood dazed and lost at the foot of her bed, knowing not only that the 37 years we had had together were over, but feeling also that all meaning had gone from life forever. He took my arm and held it for a moment. And he said in a matter of fact voice, "You'll see her again". That was all.....

But it was all I needed to hear. That simple gesture and eloquent statement reminded me of the one thing that has been given to us to help us bear such separations from our loved ones: the resurgent and ever present ability to believe in immortality.

The idea of immortality is the strongest lifeline to the grief-stricken. In my case, I could, from his words on, think of the separation of Selma and myself as temporary. Everything that sustained that belief sustained me. Three of my friends somehow knew the almost morbid sensitivity that one in grief has; they sent flowering plans instead of cut flowers, so that the idea of continuance of life and not its brief blooming would be suggested."

As our Lord put it in the long ago:

"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that were I am, there ye may be also".

When a sharp pain struck the heart of Peter Marshall and he was being carried out into the night on a stretcher, he looked up into the face of his wife Catherine and said, "See you in the morning, darling". It is the Christian conviction that though the night be dark and long, the morning will surely come and with it a blessed reunion.

CARRYING ON There is a fifth and final thing to be said. The belief in immortality is sound and we have a right to strengthen ourselves in that great assurance. Yet it is unnatural and unchristian and unhealthy to fold our hands and sit still and spend our time gazing into heaven.

When our Lord stood with his men on the Mount of Olives and was taken up out of their sight, they went back to their job of carrying on for him. They did their best to do what he would have done had he remained with them. They were consciously loyal to the One they had lost and sought to continue his life vicariously in their own work. As they did so, they were saved from the dangers of self-pity and they found the genuine satisfaction of helping to make life better for others people. Here is something, I think, for the rest of us: we can become, as Rabbi Liebman put it, "ambassadors of our departed, their messenger, and their spokesmen, carrying out the mission for which they lived and strove and which they bequeathed to us".

The late Rufus Jones had only one son, Lowell, who died at the age of eleven, but the boy continued for forty-five years to be a dominant influence in that great man's life. His study at Haverford included many photographs of the learned and the famous, but the central place, over the mantel, was always occupied by the portrait of this boy. Rufus Jones felt that he had to live for both himself and his boy, and in this he succeeded to a remarkable degree. Writing more than forty years after the occasion of his sorrow, Rufus Jones told of the boy as follows:

"I overheard him once talking to a group of playmates, when each one was telling what he wanted to be when grown up, and Lowell said when his turn came, 'I want to grow up and be a man like my daddy'. Few things in my life have ever touched me as those words did, or have given me a greater impulse to dedication".

CONCLUSION Here then is the problem of grief as seen in the light of our Christian faith. First, you must accept it as a very real emotion, as one of the facts of life and do your best to understand it. You can remind yourself of what you have possessed, instead of thinking only of what you have lost. You can rest in the Christian conviction that there is a life beyond this and you can look forward to the morning of reunion. Then you can go back to your task as an ambassador of the departed. There is hardly anyone as far along as middle life who does not have one he loves there in the unseen. It may be a wife, a husband, a mother, or a father, or even a child. In the sacred silence of this moment you recall all of the loveliness of that life. You know the things he would be doing were he alive today. You can substitute for him. You can step into his shoes and take his place and carry on. And as you do, the darkness will become light and the night will brighten into morning and you will be able to say with Jesus, "I have overcome the world".

LET US PRAY O God, as we face the solemn wonder and mystery of death, which sooner or later comes to all of us, open our eyes to see it as part of the normal experience of life. Our departure is in thy hands, even as our birth was. Take away our fear of it; help us to welcome it when it comes, knowing that in it and behind it is thy goodness and thy greatness, and that no matter what happens we rest in thy care. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen