

## "THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES"

### IV. To Grieve With Hope

#### INTRODUCTION

This is the second part of a sermon dealing with the subject of grief. Those of you who were here last Sunday morning will recall that we considered the three stages of grief that a person passes through. Shock, suffering and recovery - these are the three stages. And as I said in the closing moments of last Sunday's sermon, we do well to remember those three stages, both for ourselves and for others with whom we try to walk as far as we can.

We concluded with that clear prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr - a prayer for many occasions in life, and also a right prayer for the time of life that is grief:

"O God, grant me the serenity to accept that  
which cannot be changed;  
The courage to change that which can be  
changed.  
And the wisdom to know the difference."

Today, against the background of the three stages of grief - shock, suffering, and recovery - but even more against the background of our Christian faith, let us place three statements regarding the ways in which one can rightly grieve.

#### NATURALLY

First, we can grieve naturally. Some of us grew up in a day when the accent was on committing Bible verses to memory and we soon learned that the shortest verse in the Bible is composed of two words: "Jesus wept". But we have also come to realize that this is one of the very significant verses in the Bible, for this was the occasion when Jesus came to the home of some of his closest and dearest friends, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and finding that Lazarus had died, Jesus intimately shared the grief of Mary and Martha, for it was his grief, too. And we read, "he wept". Those words remind us that the greatest among men expressed his grief through tears. It was the natural thing.

I think that this should say something to us and to our embarrassment about tears. We tend to perpetuate the old prohibition that "big boys don't cry". We extol the courage and the strength of a man or woman who moves through a bereavement without a trace of a tear. Yet, we are beginning to see that such restraint and repression of grief is not necessarily altogether good and may later take its toll in other ways. True, we are to move toward some mastery over our emotions, rather than let our emotions master us. But ears are a vehicle for expressing grief - just as laughter is a vehicle for expressing joy - and we need not be ashamed to use them. Someone has said that "tears wash the eyes, and afterwards we somehow see a great deal better". It's true and it's good for us to remember. The author of the book of Ecclesiastes spoke for all time and all men when he said: "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh".

Moreover, we can help others to grieve naturally when we ourselves can naturally express our feelings in the presence of another's grief. It may be a sympathizing tear, a firm handclasp, an arm around the shoulders, a deed of caring, and generally such expressions convey sympathy more than any well-chosen words. We often comment that we don't know what to say in such times, and we do well to remember that an individual in grief will almost always forget your words, but he is not nearly so apt to forget that you cared enough to come be with him.

And by the same token, to grieve naturally is to talk naturally about the person who has died. As friends, we are sometimes wary of that - out of what we

think is consideration for the feelings of the surviving person. It becomes what Granger Westberg, in a little book, calls "a quiet conspiracy of silence". In his book he says:

"A typical illustration of this is a widow whose husband died a year ago or so who is with a group of friends who knew her husband. As they are talking together, one of them recalls a very humorous story about her husband. He is about to tell it, and then he thinks to himself, 'Oh, no - I must not re-open the wound.....I must be considerate of her'. Consequently, he carefully steers away from any conversation about her husband, as does everyone else. Actually, if he had told this story, she doubtless would have laughed heartily and been most pleased. He might have seen a tear or two in her eyes. If he had said, 'I'm sorry. I should not have told that story' her response in all probability would have been, 'Don't say that! You are the first person in weeks who has ever mentioned my husband. No one ever talks about him any more. It is a wonderful feeling to know that someone still remember him".

To grieve naturally is both to express emotions and to express memories - for grief and love, in a sense, go hand in hand, and grief is but a token of that love that is strong than death.

USEFULLY But come along now to the second step, and consider that as Christians, we are not only to grieve naturally, but also usefully. One of Charlie Brown's favorite expressions is "Good grief". And part of our understanding is that grief can be used for good - that there are certain opportunities for service and helpfulness that come to the grief scarred that come to no one else.

A widow of less than a month was writing about this part of grief, and she said this:

"One thing that has surprised me is the unleashing of sadness and the past of another person's life that my own grief has brought. This has happened so often that I no longer think, 'but my grief is more recent....you should be listening to me'. I have listened about children who have died....parents who had long, slow deaths, and teenagers who died in automobile accidents. I've discovered that one's own grief can turn the key in the lock of another's door of sadness and quietly open it. It suddenly seemed that I had passed some supreme test in friendship, that my grief had made me either more accessible or more able to understand. Whatever it was, I was deeply impressed."

How often we have seen it happen - that the people who convey the greatest strength to a hurting person in a time of sorrow are those who have experienced that same kind of sorrow. 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 and nodded slowly and said: "We've had more experience".

It reminds one of that line by Thornton Wilder that "in love's service, only the wounded soldiers can serve". Grief, like trouble, is never welcome, never something that we would seek, but once it comes - it can be transmuted and channeled into service and sympathy, understanding and undergirding of others. People have used grief, grown through it, and developed new grace, stature and compassion because of it.

HOPEFULLY Which leads us on to the summit of our statements regarding grief, simply that Christians come to grieve hopefully - as well as naturally and usefully.

And this is what Paul was driving at when he said to the early Christians, "You should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope". C. S. Lewis, the English thinker and writer who helped so many by his writing, wrote a little volume entitled, "A Grief Observed" - following the death of his wife. In a way, I suppose he was describing his own pilgrim's progress through those three stages of grief: shock, suffering and recovery. But one simple statement in what he wrote caught my attention and lingered with me. It was this:

"Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley....  
where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape"

Sometimes it is that hope grows as it dawns on us that Jesus walked our common road.....experienced our heartaches and our hurts and yet was not finally defeated by them.

Remember Isaiah's words which found their fulfillment in Jesus, "A man..... acquainted with grief....surely he will bear our griefs and carry our sorrows." Hope grows out of the realization that it has been done, that a lonesome valley has been turned into a hopeful journey, and done in supreme fashion by the Master, in steady fashion by his followers, and that we are not doomed to ultimate despair.

And most of all, our hope springs from "the gospel of the resurrection that refuses to concede finality to death". We do not pretend to know what is beyond death, but we do know that we stand in the light of the resurrection by which God forever reversed the roles of victor and victim as they had seemed in the lengthening shadows of that first Good Friday. This, above all, is what Paul was driving at when he said, "you should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope". The Christian, you see, trusts that same loving power that is at the heart of life 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 of ministry.

It is a great moment - when in the process of grief, a light begins to dawn, and a person feels that hope surging - hope that by the grace of God, there is purpose and power ahead for him in this life, hope that by the power of God, death is not the end - that love is indestructible and eternal, that neither we nor our loved ones can ever drift beyond the circle of His love and care!

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