

“The Gifts of Grief”

All Saints Sunday, Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
John 11:32-44

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From the Pulpit

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John 11:32-44

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Let us pray: O Holy One, we acknowledge Your active and felt presence, here, in our midst this morning. We pray that you would touch us and inspire us through Your Word for us this day. O dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

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Our Gospel reading from John for today *certainly* takes us on this *emotional* roller coaster ride ... wouldn’t you say?

I mean, in just these **thirteen** verses, there is this **wide** range of feelings that are expressed – including grief and sorrow and disbelief and disappointment and doubt and maybe even some underlying anger. *And* ... perhaps some **bargaining** behavior is also taking place in this scene as well as the expression of deep conviction and gratitude and wonder and amazement!

Phew! There is **A LOT** going on in this pericope ... and the feelings are **STRONG!**

And so, this morning, I’d like for us to take a closer look at this *familiar* story **through** the theoretical lens of what is referred to as *emotional intelligence* – that is, **that capacity** to name and claim and honor our own feelings in a healthy way ... *as* they come to us.

And in **THIS** context of **ALL SAINTS SUNDAY**, **all** of us are certainly invited and encouraged to honor those familiar feelings of grief – that all of us know well – as we move through the various stages and seasons of our lives.

And so, the chaplain and the spiritual director in me would like for us to pay close attention, this morning, to this wide range of feelings that are expressed in **this** passage from John 11.

But first, I do want to share a *family story* with you **and**, as you may well know – from personal experience, **storytelling** is an integral *part* of the grief work that we **all** need to do in order to stay closely connected to the memories of our loved ones who have died.

Now, as I **have** mentioned previously, my dad was a pastor and, in fact, he was part of that first wave of pastors of the United Church of Christ shortly after it was formed back in 1957.

And so, I was raised as a pastor's kid – or as a “PK” – as we are known; and I am the fourth out of five children.

And one of the many vivid church-related memories I have from my early years is of my older sister, Julie, sharing a story around the kitchen table about her confirmation class and, of course, my dad was her confirmation teacher.

Now, my dad had given the confirmands a typical confirmation assignment; and, that is, they were to *memorize one verse* from the Bible and then recite it in front of their peers during the following class.

And which verse do you suppose my sister, Julie, selected?

Well, it is from our text for today, John 11, verse 35, which in many versions of the Bible is just *two words*: “Jesus wept.”

Yes, **that** was the Bible verse that the “typical PK” memorized for that confirmation assignment: **the *shortest*** verse in the Bible, of course!

Jesus wept. Jesus wept.

It has been 27 years, now, since my “pastor dad” died and I think of him often and I miss him every. single. day.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we catch a glimpse of Jesus grieving in that moment of profound sadness when he was deeply touched by the *apparent* loss of his beloved friend and follower, Lazarus.

Throughout the years, I have often reflected on *this verse in this text* and I have tried to imagine what that **very moment** must have been like:

Jesus, weeping, while he was surrounded by his beloved ones – Mary and Martha – along with other friends and followers and onlookers.

This is one of those raw and poignant moments in Scripture when Jesus modeled vulnerability and compassion for his followers by authentically connecting with his own feelings within – instead of trying to clean them up or sanitize or minimize his raw feelings of grief.

Rather, Jesus expressed his emotions openly and honestly in the presence of those whom he trusted and loved.

And ... in this deeply touching and tender and *fully human moment* – Jesus. wept. too!

Jesus grieved, Jesus knew sadness ... and Jesus wept.

And, in that moment when Jesus was **overcome with grief**, he found care and comfort and support from his spiritual companions, Mary and Martha.

And through this pericope, WE are reminded that each one of us *also* needs a support team, *if you will*, in our ongoing grief work. Because grief work is **really hard** – and it’s **not** healthy – or meant for us -- to grieve on our own.

Throughout the years, I have supported others on their journeys of grief, – in the various roles that I’ve had – especially as a hospice chaplain. And ... I have **also** sought out support when **I have** needed guidance and direction in

grieving the various losses that I have experienced ... in the different stages in my life.

Several years ago, Megan Devine wrote the best-selling book, *It's Okay that You're not Okay: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture that Doesn't Understand*.

And in this book, she normalizes the reality of the role of grief in our lives. She writes:

There is nothing wrong with grief. It's a natural extension of love. It's a healthy and sane response to love. That grief feels bad doesn't make it bad. Grief is part of love ... love for life, love for self, and love for others. What you are living, painful as it may be, is love.

Grief is an expression of love. Grief. is. love.

I like that. That is *really* insightful and helpful to remember that *grief is love!*

And, as many of you know, grief work is *really hard* ... because it is WORK: intentional, emotional, *and spiritual* work. *But* – it is not work that is meant to be done on **our own!**

And so, I am deeply grateful for the compassionate care and *companionship* that YOU, our First Church family, offer one to one another in so many different ways:

- through our Stephen Ministry Team;
- and our Full Connections Circle;
- our Deacon ministry;
- our Congregational Card ministry;
- and just the way you look after one another and check on each other;
- and offer rides to those who need them;
- and before long, we will have a new Congregational Care Commission; that will organize and plan and create new ways to respond to the needs of one another.

You – First Church – are a beautiful and caring and compassionate and intentionally inclusive congregation. *Together*, all of you truly embody that *loving spirit* of Martha and Mary and the others in their care for Jesus in his time of need.

I'd like to close this morning with a beautiful Celtic poem that Josh recently shared with me:

“Walking With Grief”

George MacDonald

Do not *hurry* as you walk with grief;
it does not help the journey.

Walk slowly, pausing often:
do not hurry as you walk with grief.

Be not disturbed by memories that come unbidden.

Swiftly forgive;
and let Christ speak for you unspoken words.

Unfinished conversation will be resolved in Him.

Be not disturbed.

Be gentle with the one who walks with grief.

If it is you, be gentle with yourself.

Swiftly forgive; walk slowly, pausing often.

Take time, be gentle – as you walk with grief.

Thanks be to God, amen!

