

**“Finding Joy on the Journey of Grief”**  
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**First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(1 Thess. 4:13-18)**

“No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but I’m experiencing the sensation of being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times, it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.”<sup>1</sup>

This is how C.S. Lewis begins his little book *A Grief Observed* which tells his own story of grief after he lost his wife Joy Davidman to cancer in 1960. Lewis’ book was one of the books I read this past year as a part of my own grief work in the wake of my late wife Lorie’s death a year ago this past Thursday – November 2, 2016. I knew I needed help to give voice to all that I was experiencing, and Lewis, among several others, helped me identify and express all the pain I was going through during this very difficult time.

But Lewis, and the others who wrote books I read or with whom I met personally, also provided me hope that with God’s help I could get through it, and that, in fact, I could even grow deeper as a result of my journey through grief. They were right. I’ve learned that with Christ you can develop resilience and learn how not only to bounce back after significant loss but actually bounce forward.

This morning I want to invite you into my personal story of grief this past year, and I want to share with you some of the lessons I’ve learned along the way. This is not to say, “Hey, look at me! I’ve got it all together now,” because I don’t. Instead, what I share with you this morning is intended to invite you into my journey as a fellow struggler in Christ who has experienced deep loss and has tried to make sense of it all. Most days I simply put one foot in front of the other and tried to do the next right thing.

I pray that God might speak to you through what I share today, because, as my friend Craig Barnes says in his book *When God Interrupts*, “We all just keep losing things: wives, husbands, friends, health, the dreams and security of the past. Nothing stays the way it was.”<sup>2</sup> If you’re not dealing right now with grief over someone or something you lost, chances are you probably will, and it may be sometime sooner than you think.

## The Process of Grief

This is a picture taken of Lorie and me at Montreat last fall in late September 2016 during our congregation's all church retreat. We're sitting in rocking chairs by the dam at Lake Susan. It was a beautiful day, and listening to the water falling down was so pleasant and soothing. Look at Lorie. You'd never know how sick she was, and you never would have imagined that just 5 weeks later she would be dead.

I began to grieve losing Lorie the day we learned she had cancer in January 2015. There is no cure for multiple myeloma, and I knew that barring a miracle of God or a major medical breakthrough I would eventually lose her at some point. I can remember driving down Robinhood Road the day after we learned the sad news, and I was crying so hard I could hardly see the road. I kept calling out to God, and I asked Him to be with us. And He was every step of the way.

However, when Lorie actually died almost two years later, I entered a new phase of my grief process. Actually, it involved a number of phases in this new season of grief. No matter how long a person has been ill and you know that eventually they're going to die, when it actually happens the world changes all of a sudden. And you're left with the sobering reality that they are never coming back.

John Claypool wrote a wonderful book entitled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, and it gave expression to the experience I had in the days following Lorie's death. He explained how the process of grief parallels the story of Job in the Bible, and this morning I want to share with you some of his insights.

John says the first phase of grief is *numb shock*. He sees this phase of grief in the story of Job when his three friends come after his many losses, and they simply sit together in silence for seven days. It's hard to get your head around it all, and sometimes you walk around in a daze not really able to make sense of anything.

Shortly after Lorie died, someone asked me how I was doing. I told them that I felt like I had fallen into an unknown country where I don't speak the language, and I couldn't find any landmarks to help me get my bearings or my sense of direction. All I knew to do is to put one foot in front of the other and try to take the next step. That's the numb shock Claypool writes about. Maybe you've been there before. Maybe you're right there now.

The second phase in the process of grief Claypool says is *despair*. This is when Job says that he wished he had never been born, and he's in utter despair at the thought of going on. Thoughts of suicide sometimes enter in, and you just want your life to be over and to go and be with your loved one in heaven. Last winter there were many times when I was convinced my best days were behind me, and my future was going to be an awful one. I just wanted to go to heaven and be with Lorie. Have you ever felt like that?

The third phase in the process of grief is *nostalgia*. Claypool observed that Job looked back and remembered the good ole days when his children were alive, his possessions were intact, and he had the esteem of the community. I can't tell you how many times I said out loud to God this past year, "I just want her back. I just want Lorie back." I'd look at old photographs of happy days when the kids were growing up. Lorie looked so young and happy and vital. And I would just cry and cry as I remembered how good our life had been together.

Next in the book of Job, Claypool observed a fourth phase in the process of grief, and it's the phase of *anger* when *we want some answers from God*. Job wanted an audience with God, and he felt like the Lord had some explaining to do. Job got his audience with God, but it was more than Job bargained for.

There were many times this past year when I asked God, "Why?" I wanted an explanation of my own. Why did Lorie have to die now, just when her grandchildren were getting to know her, just when she was doing so much good with Samaritan's Purse? We had so many plans, so many things we wanted to do together. Why now? Why Lorie?

God never answered my questions, just as He never answered Job's. And often I just sat in the silence wondering. I read many good books which helped me make sense of the not knowing, but I never really got the answers I was looking for. However, what I discovered God gave me was so much more important and valuable than answers. In the midst of all the questions, I realized God had given me Himself. He gave me Jesus. And that has been the sweetest part of this journey – to discover when all you have left is God, He is enough.

There was a moment in my journey when I found myself in this place of anger and questioning, and in the midst of my sadness and confusion I remembered the passage where Jesus asked His disciples if they were going to abandon Him because some of His other disciples stopped following Christ when Jesus' teaching got tough and demanding. But Peter said, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*" (Jn. 6:68). I actually said those words out loud to the Lord several times this past year. And I found that when Jesus is all you have, He really is enough.

The fifth and final stage Claypool says is key if we're ever going to make progress in our journey of grief, and this phase involves *gratitude* and *hope*. Instead of being resentful over what you lost and regret what you no longer have, you have to press on to discover what you can be grateful for that you had for as long as you had it.

God reminded Job that everything he had been so indignant about losing never really belonged to him in the first place. They were gifts, and they were beyond his deserving. To be angry because a gift has been taken away is to miss the whole point of life. Gratitude and humility are the best ways to deal with our losses. And

if you can't find your way to gratitude, Claypool says you're going to get stuck in your grief. I believe he's right.

In his book Claypool offers a story to illustrate what he's talking about. He says that when he was a boy he grew up during World War II, and during the war his neighbor enlisted in the army and headed off to join the troops. But before he did, the neighbor asked John's parents if he could store his furniture, which included a washing machine, in their basement. John's parents said, "Sure," so the neighbor moved his things over, and he said they could use the washing machine while he was gone.

John loved that old-timey washing machine with all the rollers and the fancy machinery. Washing machines were rare back then, and since John helped with washing the clothes as one of his family chores, it really made his job a lot easier.

Well, three years later the neighbor returned home from the war, and he took all of his furniture back, including the washing machine. John was so upset, and he complained bitterly to his mother. "Why did he have to take the washing machine back?" he cried.

John's mother replied, "John, it never belonged to us. It was always a gift. And we shouldn't complain that we no longer have it. We should be grateful that it ever came to us in the first place."

Reading this story was a breakthrough for me, and I was able to change my perspective from one of resentment over what I lost in Lorie's death to one of gratitude that I was ever married to her in the first place. Most people don't get to experience what she and I did for as long as we did – 38 years. This change in perspective literally transformed my life.

There's another aspect of this phase or stage of grief. When you move on to gratitude, you also discover God also gives you the gift of *hope*. And it's a hope that expresses itself in two ways: the hope of heaven; and the hope of a future here on earth.

At the end of the book Job, the patriarch says, "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that after this body has decayed I will still see God*" (Job 19:25,26). I don't think I've ever thought as much about heaven as I have this past year, and I also don't think it's ever meant as much to me as it does now. The hope of heaven has provided immeasurable comfort to me as I think about all that Lorie is enjoying right now in the arms of Jesus and all the glories she's experiencing in the presence of God. Death is a reality we're all going to face one day, and the more work you and I do here on earth to prepare ourselves for heaven, the more ready we will be when that day comes.

The second aspect of hope that comes as a result of growing in gratitude is the *hope of a future*. God made it clear to Job that God hadn't been defeated by the events of the past, and the Lord was still able to give meaning to Job's life. In

other words, apart from all appearances, Job still had a future because God had a future for Job. And the rest of the book of Job begins to detail what that future was all about.

I shared with you earlier that I had some dark days last winter after Lorie died when I felt like my best days were behind me. I don't believe that anymore. I've come to realize that I have so much to live for in my children and my grandchildren, and I've never been more excited about our ministry at First Pres than I am now. In addition, this fall I invited one of the Winston-Salem fellows to live with me for the year. Patrick has been such a Godsend for me, and I think I have been for him too. It's been one of the most unexpected blessings of the year so far. And I don't think I would have ever invited a Fellow to live with me if Lorie hadn't died.

A few weeks after Lorie passed away, a friend wrote me an email, and in it he said this: "I look forward to seeing God's assignment for you, Peter, but I know that it may well be unlike anything you've anticipated. Such is the nature of God."

My friend is right, and I've come to a place where I'm excited about the new adventure God has for me. I don't know all of what it entails, but I believe by faith that it's going to be a good one. Make no mistake, I still miss Lorie every single day, and I wish she was still alive. Last Thursday I cried more than I expected I would a year after her passing. But I've also come to a place where I can accept and trust that it was Lorie's time to go, and God has a bigger plan than I can ever imagine or understand – for Lorie and for me. And I want to lean into my future knowing that God is already there waiting for me. He loves us and He wants the best for us.

In the passage we've read this morning, Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica, *"We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord's Word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:13-18).*

### **Finding Joy on the Journey of Grief**

**SLIDE)** There are many other insights into grief I would like to share with you today, but there isn't time in this communion meditation for me to cover all that

I've learned. I'll have to leave that for a future sermon. However, what I do want to share with you as I close this morning has to do with finding joy on the journey of grief. For many months after Lorie died, it felt like I had a weight tied around my heart that held me down and bound me and was keeping my spirit from experiencing joy. On occasion, I would laugh at something funny, and I experienced little glimpses, little flashes of joy. But they were rare, and they didn't last long.

But somewhere along the way, and I can't remember exactly when the change occurred, I noticed that my heart was lighter and I felt excitement about my future. I think it happened about the time last summer when I was with my kids and my grandchildren. All of a sudden, I noticed that joy was returning to my heart. And I observed it was at a time when I began to focus on gratitude and tried to intentionally develop an attitude of praise. Gradually I was letting go of the past and I was reaching for the future, and joy began to return to my heart.

In his book *Finding My Way Home*, Catholic writer Henri Nouwen says, "Your whole life is filled with losses, endless losses. And every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression, and resentment, or you choose to let these losses be passages to something new, something wider, and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to a greater life of freedom."<sup>3</sup>

In another of his books Nouwen writes about the first time he saw a trapeze artist at a circus.<sup>4</sup> He was thrilled as he watched these artists "dance in the air" as he put it. They soared and all was dangerous until they found themselves caught by the strong hands of their partners. Henri told his father that he always wanted to fly like that and perhaps he had missed his calling!

Nouwen observed that at each performance the fliers let go of the bar and trusted that their flight will end in their hands sliding into the secure grip of a partner. They also knew that only the release of the secure bar allows them to move on with arcing grace to the next. Before they can be caught, they must let go. They must brave the emptiness of space.

He says that living with this willingness to let go is one of the greatest challenges we face. Whether it's a person, a possession, or our personal reputation, in so many areas of life we hold on at all costs. But the great paradox is that it is in letting go that we receive. We find safety in unexpected places of risk. And those who try to avoid all risk, those who would try to guarantee that their hearts will not be broken, end up missing out on the glory God has in store for them if they would just let go and trust Him.

I still treasure all the wonderful memories of Lorie and the life we shared together, but I'm learning to let go of the past and allow myself to be caught by the

strong hands of our heavenly Father. In this scary process, I find that He is worthy of my trust, and He is giving me joy again.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*” The comfort of God almighty is there for each of us if we reach out and entrust our lives to His care. During your grief, allow the strong hands of God to catch you and hold you and to help you find joy on your journey of grief too. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Turn my Mourning into Dancing*, pp. 25ff.