

Sermon: “Lessons on Grief” (service leader)

Grief isn't something we often talk about. It's also, as this comic points out, territory rife with weird commentary and disconnect. My hope is that we can do two things this morning. One is to help explain the nature of grief to help bridge the disconnect. The second is to explore what people who are not grieving can say or do when someone close to them is grieving.

Let's start with the experience of grief. And I want to be clear in case anyone's feeling wary, that we're going to talk about this conceptually to help with making sense of what grief is. I'm not telling stories about grief or asking you to experience it. This is an exercise in cuing into our assumptions and making space for a deeper understanding.

The five stages of grief model that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced in her 1969 book “On Death and Dying” is one of the most ubiquitous ways of thinking about grief in our culture. But it's a model without real data behind it and the model was based on Kubler-Ross's work with terminally ill patients, not people living with grief.

The thing I find most problematic with the five stages of grief is the suggestion that grief is an orderly, linear process, and that the process has an end. Digest your grief and then be rid of it, right. I know, from my own work and training, that this is simply untrue.

Grief isn't something that goes away. Our capacity to live with grief can grow and change, but the grief itself remains. Because grief is what's left when we've loved and lost. The greater the love, the more profound the grief. And when someone dies unexpectedly or too young, part of what's lost is the hope for that person's future, for the relationship that was integral to the experience of our own lives. As our lives go on, that absence is a constant presence.

When Pauline and I were talking about this service, she shared a sanskrit term with me that I hadn't heard before. It's “vilomah” - V I L O M A H vilomah - which means “against the natural order of things.”

Grief turns the world upside down, especially when death comes unexpectedly or too soon. And that doesn't change - time doesn't turn the world right again. We learn to live with the vilomah, learn to navigate an upside down world, but the landscape is fundamentally and forever changed. And that disordered world is constantly reminding you of how much has changed - grief is a complete sensory experience.

The idea of this is terrifying, which, I think, is why we so often fumble when we encounter people who are deep in grief. We don't want our own world to turn, we can't imagine having to live in such a reality, so we turn away, we say things like "it's better this way" or we expect the grieving person to move on in time. But living with grief is a daily practice, not something you digest and get over; so saying things to people that try to help them move through it faster isn't helpful - it only highlights the disconnect.

So what can we do? How can we be good companions to people living with grief?

Hopefully it's obvious that we can't get rid of someone else's grief. We wish they weren't suffering, of course, but grief is tied up with love. We cannot undo the loss and how could we ever want to take away someone's love? I point this out because our desire for other people to move on from their grief is about our own discomfort, not their process.

This self-awareness about how we, the companions, are feeling is important so that we're not inadvertently asking someone who's grieving to take care of our anxiety about their grief.

I don't remember which colleague taught me this, but I find the epicenter of care idea to be helpful when talking about grief and emotional labor. Emotional labor meaning who's doing the work of regulating their feelings during an interaction. Whose feelings are being tended to and who is doing the tending.

The epicenter of care asks us to imagine that a loss is like an earthquake and those closer to the loss are more affected than people who are farther removed in

relationship. It's important that we understand where we fall, because care should only flow inwards towards the epicenter. Meaning, emotional labor should only flow from people less affected to people who are more affected.

So when we're interacting with someone who's grieving, first we check in with our own feelings and assumptions about grief, second we remember where we are in the epicenter of care - who do we need to care for and who can we ask for care.

The third thing is that we offer concrete and specific care. For example, saying "let me know if you need anything" is too open ended and puts the other person in the position of coming up with an idea and then asking for it. Instead try "let's take a walk, what day is good for you?" Or "I'm making an extra lasagna, is there a good time to drop it off?"

This dynamic of offering care without asking something of the other person can also play out in smaller interactions. Pauline has taught many of us the power of saying "it's good to see you" or "I'm glad you're here" as a greeting instead of the impossible to answer "how are you?"

So to recap: are you aware of your own feelings, are you offering care to people more affected than you, and are you doing the emotional labor and offering concrete care.

We cannot take away another person's grief, but we can make sure they're not left alone and adrift as they navigate the impossible of an upside down world.

And that is a profound thing, even if it doesn't feel like we're really doing anything. But the task of caring is not to fix the grief, it's to make sure the person grieving isn't alone with it all.

I asked Pauline to describe that companionship and the effect it has on her as she navigates the landscape of her grief. She said that companionship looks like people being open to listening, clearly present when they're listening, thoughtful with their responses, and allowing time in the conversation - letting it unfold slowly.

I then asked Pauline what it was like when people do all of those things and she said it's a relief. "It feels calming and easy; like jumping on a trampoline that keeps expanding to catch you." She said, "those interactions can hold you in balance."

This is part of the power of community, of being a people committed to a covenant of caring for each other. The practice of holding the world in balance is something we do together, so that no one need be adrift. We do this imperfectly, of course, and the task of living in covenant is finding our way back, building our capacity to care, and showing up when we can, knowing when we need to receive and when we need to give.

Because grief is part of life, but no one need suffer it alone.

Amen and blessed be.