

“LIVING WITH LOSS”
Psalm 30:4-5, 11-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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One of my heroes in the ministry, the late Carlyle Marney, told about a time he presided at a Communion service in his church in Charlotte, North Carolina. At the appointed time he stood behind the Lord’s Table and surveyed his congregation. Then he was astonished at the words that came out of his mouth. He said, “What a bunch of losers we all are.”

Now, you need to know that most of the people in Marney’s church were highly competent and successful. They weren’t losers in the competitive sense; by our usual cultural standards they were winners. But Marney had been their pastor for several years. He knew that every person in that room had lost something of value. They were all “[persons] of sorrow, acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). Perhaps they had lost a prized possession or a dream or a relationship. Some had lost their physical vitality. And, if the truth be known, they had all lost their innocence. Marney was pointing that day to a universal pattern: to be human is to experience again and again the pain of giving up something that is familiar and cherished. The longer you and I live, the more losses we accumulate. It’s true, isn’t it? “What a bunch of losers we all are.”

I’ve been privileged to be your pastor for over seven years now, and I’ve witnessed some of your losses first-hand. In just the past seven months, you’ve lost much of the normalcy in your everyday life that you took for granted. Some of you have lost employment and income. All of you have lost your usual sense of safety and security. You’ve lost a measure of your freedom, your mobility, and your face-to-face contact with people you care about. These losses have been somewhat bearable because you trust that they are only temporary, that you will gradually get back much of what you had to give up. But some of your losses during the time I have known you have been permanent and irreversible. You’ve said goodbye to long-time friends and pillars of our church and community. You’ve buried parents and spouses and siblings and children. In recent months, some of you had your pain compounded because you were not able to be with your loved ones when they died or honor them with a traditional funeral. So, as I look out on your faces this morning, I’m prompted to say, with all due respect, “What a bunch of losers we all are.” We are indeed “[persons] of sorrow, acquainted with grief.”

I want to tell you about a time when I got “acquainted with grief” from a unique vantage point. I learned some things about the process of losing and grieving that I didn’t know before. Back in the fall of 1989, I was serving as a hospital chaplain in Cincinnati, Ohio. One night I attended a memorial service for family members who had lost babies in that hospital during the previous year. I sat down in the small chapel and looked around. There were about a dozen people in the room, and the first thing that went through my mind was, “Where are all the men?” Except for the presiding chaplain and myself, everyone there was a woman – presumably the mothers and grandmothers of the deceased babies. But no daddies, no granddaddies.

That evening I got acquainted with grief in a new way: I learned that different people grieve in different ways. It amazed me to learn that two individuals in the same family – in this case, a mother and a father – could respond to the loss of a child in such contrasting ways. The mothers were obviously still grieving their babies. Perhaps they felt a freedom to grieve publicly, and a need to do

so, in a place where they could receive support from others who shared and understood their pain. The fathers, for whatever reason, apparently did not have that need or were reluctant to express it.

I make no judgments about the absence of the men that night – just the observation that different people grieve in different ways. When you lose a person or a possession you love, no one hands you a set of instructions and says, “This is how you’re supposed to grieve: Step One, Step Two, Step Three.” Mourning clothes do not come in one size that fits all. Which means that you may respond to a major loss differently than the person sitting in a nearby pew today. If you lose a loved one after a long terminal illness, your grief may be tempered by relief. If you lose your loved one suddenly and unexpectedly, you may feel nothing but anguish in your heart. And these differences are OK, because there is no “right” way to grieve. In spite of what the textbooks say, there is no “textbook” way to grieve. There is just your way.

Which leads me to recall one other thing I learned at that memorial service. It was something the chaplain said in his sermon. He started out by warning those family members that the people in their social network might have a tendency to discount or minimize their grief. They might say things, trying to be comforting, which in fact would be discomforting: “You’re still young; you can always have another child” . . . “I guess God needed your baby to be one of his angels” . . . “You’d feel a lot worse if you’d lost an older child” . . . “You’ve got to pull yourself together and get on with your life.” Do you hear how these kinds of comments discount a person’s grief?

Well, the chaplain did something that night which I thought showed a great deal of insight and compassion. He gave those mothers and grandmothers permission to grieve. He said, “Even though your child lived only briefly, your grief for that child is just as real and painful as any grief.” Then the chaplain went on to issue another warning – that their pain wouldn’t go away overnight. This is the way he put it: “There are some losses in life that you don’t get over; you just learn to live with them, like learning to walk with a limp.”

I’ve never forgotten that comment because it resonated deeply with my own experience. Until I was forty years old, I had endured very few losses in my life – no tragedies in my immediate family, no big failures or setbacks. By all outward measures, I had lived a charmed life. And then, in a span of only three years, I lost many of the significant relationships I had cherished. As I was overwhelmed with grief during that period, I learned that ignorance is not bliss, that what you don’t know can hurt you. You see, I entered that ordeal believing that grief has a short life-span, especially for a Christian.

One of my favorite lines in the Bible is from the 30th Psalm. It is quoted in today’s Call to Worship. The psalmist says to God: “We may cry through the night, but your joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5b). Now, if you take that verse literally, it suggests that grief is intense and painful while it lasts, but it doesn’t last long. It’s sort of like enduring a sleepless night when you toss and turn and agonize and perhaps even weep over some difficulty or decision in your personal life. You think the light of morning will never come; but it does, and soon the warmth of the sun dries the tears from your eyes and you’re able to see your problem from a new perspective and move on. The crisis passes in less than 12 hours! You may cry through the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Well, when I was a newcomer to grief, I imagined that my crying would be over that quickly, that I would be able just to file away my losses and feel better in no time at all. How I wish I had known that grief doesn’t work that way. Grief doesn’t come with a set of instructions, and it doesn’t come with a set timetable either! As one bereaved person put it, “Grief is a process with no rules or boundaries. Its only marker stands at the beginning – with the shattering shock of a death – but there’s no buoy to mark the midway point. And no finish line.”

I wonder this morning if you have this awareness about grief. What you don't know can hurt you, and this is very valuable information to know: the loss of a cherished person or possession is not something you just "get over." I went to high school with a gorgeous girl named Farrah Fawcett, who later became a famous Hollywood actress. I had a terrible crush on her, but when I realized she didn't even know I existed, I got over it. Years later, while I was living in Louisville, Kentucky, I lost my wallet. It was a scary, frustrating experience, but I got over it. I just replaced the wallet and its contents and got on about my business. Now as I get older, I'm gradually losing my hair. I wish it were otherwise; but I've long since gotten over it. However, "there are some losses in life that you don't get over; you just learn to live with them, like learning to walk with a limp."

Thank God, the pain of grief does have a way of decreasing over time. One year, five years, fifteen years down the road, the pain is not as constant or intense as it is in the immediate aftermath of a loss. But the pain will still be there, at least on occasion, when you glance at a portrait sitting on the dresser, or see an empty chair at the dining table, or hear an old melody you both loved, or look at the calendar and realize it's his or her birthday. When that pain stabs you again, don't conclude that you're falling apart or going crazy. Be patient with yourself. Broken bones heal a lot more quickly than broken hearts.

No one understands this better than the apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he's writing to people who are in a state of deep grief. It's clear from this letter that the early Church expects Jesus to make his triumphant return at any moment. But Christ's second coming is mysteriously delayed. Now the first generation of Christians is dying off, and those left behind are weighed down with grief. They are faithful Christians, but they're also human, and they are grieving.

It's to this group of people – people very much like you and me – that Paul writes: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Notice that Paul doesn't say, "You may not grieve," and leave it at that. That's how a lot of Christians have read this verse. They've concluded that grieving is a sign of spiritual weakness. But this is to take Paul's words out of context. Paul knows that grief is a normal response to any significant loss, and he also knows that grief is not something you just "get over" like a toothache. He's not trying to prohibit or suppress your grief. His concern is "that you . . . do not grieve as others do who have no hope." Do you see what Paul is doing here? Paul draws the line, not on grief, but on despair.

Now, I realize it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. Sometimes grief takes the form of despair and feels like despair. You may lose a loved one and conclude that because that one relationship is lost, all is lost. You may believe you've come to a dead end, that you have nothing to live for or look forward to in the future. But Paul says this is where you draw the line: he says it's possible to grieve without giving in to despair. Yes, you feel empty and sad about the loss of someone you cherish; but at the same time, you have hope. You have hope not only for your loved one in the hereafter; you also have hope for yourself in the here and now. When someone you love dies, a part of you dies, too; but eventually, if your hope is grounded in God, you also experience a rebirth – of new loves, new interests, and new possibilities. On God's timetable, despair is always premature.

I have known Frank and Betty Peerman all my life. Frank is now deceased, but Betty is still living in her mid-90's in my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas. Frank was my favorite high school Sunday School teacher; he was a respected deacon in my home church; he was a highly successful home builder and developer; he lived in big house in a posh neighborhood. He had an ideal family – a beautiful wife, two lovely daughters about my age and two handsome sons about the age of my

younger brother Paul. But as it turned out, Frank Peerman was also a “loser” – like one of those losers I described at the beginning of my sermon.

One day the Peermans’ youngest son Jody, who was about 12 years old, was riding his bicycle on a street in my hometown. A drunk driver hit him from behind and killed him instantly. Frank and Betty were plunged into an abyss of grief. It wasn’t just the death of their son that ate on them; it was the way their son died, and who killed him – it was the injustice of it all. For years, this couple tasted the bitter dregs of sorrow.

And then the unthinkable happened. The Peermans’ older son Terry had grown up and gone into business with his dad. Terry was being groomed to take over the construction firm. He was a gifted athlete, an exceptional tennis player, but his health was always clouded by diabetes. One day, Terry didn’t show up for an out-of-town appointment. Someone found him in a motel room, dead from diabetic shock, not yet thirty years old. Once again, Frank and Betty were consumed by grief. The loss of one child would be traumatic enough; but can you imagine the pain of losing two?

Sometime during his grieving process Frank decided to write a book. I’m sure it was a kind of therapy for him, something to help him get his feelings off his chest and out into the open. And, make no mistake about it, his book was brutally honest. Frank minced no words in describing his hurt and despair about burying two young sons. But alongside this honesty there was a remarkable testimony of hope. In his book Frank pointed to two things that sustained him as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. One was the assurance that his sons were alive and well in the presence of God; the other was his belief that God was not finished with him either. He admits that he never “got over” his losses; he just learned to live with them. He couldn’t replace his sons, but he could redefine his own life. He could redirect his love and energy to new activities and other people, and that’s exactly what he did.

Frank Peerman began to apply himself as a student of the Scriptures and became the most popular adult Sunday School teacher in my home church. He developed a new hobby – model trains. Every fall, he would rearrange his family living room and construct an enormous model train display, a miniature village at Christmastime. That project, too, was a form of therapy, a way of distracting himself from his grief. But it wasn’t just a private passion, a hobby that he hoarded for himself. Each December, Frank and his wife Betty blocked out two weeks and hosted different groups each night, groups from the church and community, scores of people who came to marvel at the model train exhibit and catch the Christmas spirit. Frank Peerman said in his book that by opening his heart and home to other people, he began to experience joy again.

By the way, the title of Frank Peerman’s book was that famous phrase from the 30th Psalm: *Joy Comes with the Morning*. Yes, you and I may grieve, but not as others do who have no hope. “We may cry through the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Not tomorrow morning, perhaps, but some morning in God’s radiant future.