

Jessica Field, Feb 25, 2024 sermon for St. Lawrence Libertyville, IL

“The reality of loss is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal, and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor should you want to.” - Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

Good morning. I have had the beautiful opportunity this weekend of walking with your community in grief. Some of you may have been at the adults or kids and youth sessions on Saturday, or joined us for chili dinner after. Some of you may have seen the youth mosaic project that is being completed as an illustration of how we can build ourselves into something new after loss breaks us open. I hope all of you will join us tonight at prayer stations, right here, to come together as a community in our grief, to honor losses, and reach ourselves, each other, and the world with the warm light of compassionate prayer.

How apt that this morning’s text offers us a chance to look at grief through the lens of a suffering Jesus, who is asking us to walk with him. He said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” This is a text about suffering. This is Jesus asking us to set aside our belief that we can fix everything and to instead face our suffering and trust that he will be with us in it. When our suffering is from grief, we know that the way out of it is through it. Jesus is encouraging us to carry our grief as our cross, in order to heal.

In researching and looking around at how others interpret this text, I found a lot of “we must suffer as Christ suffered to truly know him!” This bit of suffering theology can be quite problematic when interpreted in ways that deny our feelings of sorrow and anger. If we interpret this to mean that we are supposed to suffer for Glory, or that suffering is a ticket to heaven, we end up with modern day statements - often well-intentioned - such as, “everything happens for a reason” or “God won’t give you anything you can’t handle.” Ugh, who wants to scream when they hear those phrases? I just cannot believe in a Godly plan that kills and maims some so that others may evolve. The loving God who became flesh so that we may intimately know him cannot tragically kill a husband just so that his wife can learn to appreciate life. The loving God who gave us the Holy Spirit to be a light on our path cannot allow for a toddler to drown in the sea while her family is fleeing an oppressive regime just so that the world can wake up to injustice. Our God cannot give children cancer as a development tool for the rest of us.

So, what might Jesus mean when he tells us to take up our cross? I believe it is a call to lean into our suffering rather than avoid it. When we push our grief or our anger away, we miss out on opportunities for growth and transformation. The tragedy is not given by God, but our emotional response of grief is a gift from God. We grieve because we love. Is love not a gift? You might think this sounds an awful lot like “everything happens for a reason,” but there is a small yet significant distinction: everything does not happen for a reason, but there is opportunity in

everything that happens. We can make meaning from suffering and still wish that we didn't suffer. We can find purpose after a tragedy and still believe that if we were given super powers, we would travel back in time and change the outcome.

Jesus accepted his suffering—he scolded Peter when he tried to save him from it because Jesus wanted to teach that though we cannot always be saved from our suffering, we can be with each other in it. Who here knows anyone who has not suffered? It is because of our shared experience of suffering that we can be radically compassionate toward one another. It is because we don't flee from suffering that we can show up for one another when it arrives unbidden and unwelcome.

We have a choice when things do not go as planned—to decide to turn away from God or to turn toward God. We can invite our grief in, as a teacher for us, or we can do everything in our power to avoid it. Here is what we know about grief—it is there whether we want it or not, and it does not go away. Over time, grief changes shape and our emotions feel less intense, but we are forever changed by loss, and we are forever accompanied by grief. It is when we allow grief to integrate into our lives that we begin to heal. In this way, we take up our cross and Jesus is there with us to help bear the weight. When we accept that what happened, happened, we can ask God to show us the way. We can pray, “God, I am hurting. Please help me heal. Please help me feel your presence in the midst of sorrow.”

God knows you're in pain. God knows you feel buried in the dark. God also knows that transformation comes after dark places. The caterpillar is in a dark chrysalis when its body essentially dissolves into goo, before it emerges as a butterfly, bringing color and beauty to the world. A tiny seed is buried in the dark earth, where it germinates until it sprouts into the light and can become a tree that children climb. St. John of the Cross spent 14 years in a time he called the “dark night of the soul”, before he experienced a transformation that gave his life deeper meaning and joy.

I feel it is here that I must reiterate, this does not mean everything happens for a reason. Bad things happen. Period. Full stop. We know that. What we do with that, is where hope lies. Bad things happen and we can ask God to show us how we can make meaning from them. Crosses of tragedy or challenge get thrown at our feet all the time. We can run from them, or pick them up and carry them, knowing that this is how we heal, and this is how we make the choice to let our grief transform us.

Do you all remember the shooting that happened in Tucson in 2011? At an event outside of a Safeway grocery store, our congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot along with 18 other people. Six people died, including the youngest of the victims, 9-year-old Christina-Taylor Green. Christina-Taylor, a little girl who was born on 9/11, of all days, was a straight A student who sang in her church choir. She had a budding interest in government and had just been elected class president at her elementary school—her focus was to help her less fortunate classmates. A family friend had brought Christina-Taylor to see Rep. Giffords that day, to nurture her growing interest in politics. Her mother remembers how excited she was to go.

Christina-Taylor's death was tragic and our community grieved. Bad things happen. Period. So, what did people do with it? Devastated by Christina-Taylor's death and moved by the people who tried to save her life, her best friends, Jamie Stone and Serenity Hammrich, both resolved to live with a specific purpose from that point on. As of 2021, Jamie was already enrolled at the University to be an EMT, with plans of becoming a paramedic and then part of a flight rescue team with the National Guard so that she could help people experiencing bodily traumas. Jamie said, "I try to live my best life for her. I think about her all the time." Serenity wanted to become a nurse so she could help people in their time of need and continue to heal from the loss. She said, "When I lost Christina-Taylor, it was very hard for me, and it's still hard for me today. I really work to push myself to be the person she would want me to be and experience all the things she can't because she's gone."

I wonder if Jamie and Serenity saw their response to their friend's death as taking up their cross. They were given a circumstance in life that, I'm sure we all agree, no one should have to experience, yet they didn't run. This heavy cross of grief and loss lay on the ground before them. They could've avoided it. We wouldn't have blamed them. So many young people who experience traumas become statistics of depressed or cripplingly anxious adults, some resort to drugs or alcohol to numb the pain, some decide their trauma story will be their only story. We cannot judge them—grief is excruciating.

But these best friends didn't run. As children, they saw the grief and loss before them and they picked it up, carrying its heavy weight as they moved forward. Christina-Taylor didn't have to die for her friends to find purpose, but she did die, and so her friends chose to find purpose in their loss. Jesus asks us to take up our grief cross because the only way out is through. "Take up your cross and follow me," is a statement of love and care. Jesus is saying, pick up your heavy burdens and journey with me, and I will help you. Jesus is showing us the way.

Everything does not happen for a reason, but when bad things happen, you can choose to open space for these difficult realities to transform you--you have to accept that you cannot do it yourself, pick up your grief, and walk with Jesus.

Even in our walk with Jesus, grief lives with us for the rest of our days—we will always miss those we love who have died. We will experience sadness and anger and fear, but our emotions evolve, too. They begin to not overwhelm us. They begin to not sneak up on us as often. We find the breaks between them lengthen.

Our grief shapes us as we rebuild and relearn our lives after what we thought we knew and who we were, were shattered. Those shattered pieces don't go away, but they get rearranged into something new. Like the butterfly and the tree. Like Jamie and Serenity.

Pick up your grief and walk with Jesus. He will show you the way.