

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 6, 2022

Matthew 16:21-23

So on this first Sunday of Lent we begin a new worship series together. We've entitled it Good Grief: Navigating Loss Together. I think it's important for us just to preface our time together this day in the proclamation of the word and as we begin to navigate grief together, a couple of important truths about the process of grief. So we imagine when we hear about the stages of grief that grief would be a...a linear process. We would move through each of those stages and then reach completion. It's important for us to know that grief is more fluid than that. It's not linear. C.S Lewis said, "Grief turns out to be not a state but a process. Grief is like a winding road where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." So Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief will help guide our study, but we'll use a number of different resources as we do this together. It's also important to note that grief can be difficult and can be scary to face, so you need to know that it is okay to be scared, okay to be bewildered. We'll navigate it together. We are in this journey, this Lenten journey, towards the cross and towards the tomb as one body, and yet each of us carries with us different places of grief and loss. And so each sermon might impact you very differently than it impacts someone else, perhaps even someone close to you in the pews, and that's okay too. Our gospel lesson that will guide our examination of the stage of grief denial comes from the Gospel of Matthew, the 16th chapter, verses 21 through 23. Let us listen together to God's word for each of us and to the church.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we have this scene that the gospel writer lays out for us. Jesus foreshadowing the journey that he is embarking upon. He will suffer and he will be killed, then he will be raised.

And the disciple that we heard about just a few weeks ago, leaving a net full of fish, leaving boats on the shore and following, this disciple upon hearing this news pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you."

Peter can't imagine such a thing happening to Jesus. Suffering and death do not align with who Peter believes Jesus to be.

Amongst I'm sure a host of emotions, Peter is certainly scared, and it comes out sideways here. He doesn't want to think about those sorts of things happening to his friend. First and foremost,

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let alone the one that he will come to name as the Messiah. This is our first glimpse of Peter beginning his process of grief in a state of denial.

So denial, we should define some terms, is simply an unwillingness to allow a thought or an experience into one's consciousness. At its root, denial is a defense mechanism, and the truth is that it has real benefits. In many ways denial protects us from the difficult realities of the world. In some ways it actually keeps us sane.

So what might denial look like? It could look like averting one's eyes from a wound that has been sustained and asking a friend "how bad is it?"

It could look like seeing a pattern in a friendship or a romantic relationship and imagining that the pattern will change all by itself given enough time.

The psalmist articulates denial well in psalm 55 when they say, "My heart is in anguish within me. The tears of death fall upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say "Oh, that I had wings like a dove. I would fly away and be at rest. Truly, I would flee far away. I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and the tempest."

What does denial look like when it takes on flesh in real life?

Well, denial might look like surviving a pandemic and expecting everything to go back to the way that it was--at home or at school or at work or even in church. Denial might look like living as if we have gone through generational trauma together and that we haven't been changed forever. Denial might even look like grabbing a bulletin this morning and looking at the title of the sermon and saying to oneself "Why are we doing a worship series on grief?"

The truth of our church's story, Idlewild, is that beyond navigating a pandemic for the last two years, which would have been enough of a burden on its own, we have lost a great number of people that we deeply love, that have met us in our places of need, shepherded us, cared for us, loved us. If you're visiting with us this day, this is your first time with us, then you don't know the names of the people of which I speak this morning, but you need to know that in this place together the last three years have brought a whole lot of navigating of loss and grief. There's also been great joy, absolutely, but the season of Lent is a time for us to reflect and prepare for the cross and for the tomb and, ultimately, for the empty grave.

What might denial look like personally? It might look a little more desperate, actually. My mom was diagnosed with cancer when I was 11 years old. I talked about her a few times from this pulpit. She had three treatments, three distinct seasons over 15 months together. It started with a sore in her mouth that moved to her chest, then lymph nodes, across her body. After about 15 months, the doctors discovered a brain tumor that was ultimately what took her life, but at that point it was the early spring of 1994.

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And people were in a different place trying to navigate what it might look like to lose her. A dear friend of hers, faithful friend who loved her, loved my mother very much, came to my father, Bible in hand, and said, "We need to cut a hole in the roof of the house. We need to pick her up on a blanket and we need to lower her through it."

My father looked directly in this person's eyes and said, "There's no way, there's no way we're doing that." It was the first time I got to witness my father recognize and move from the place of denial. We've been in it for a number of months. Every time that the scan came back clean, we decided that life would begin anew. In fact, just a couple months before this, they bought a brand new car, the first brand new car, the only brand new car my family would ever have. Baby blue. 1994 Honda Accord. That was a celebration gift because the journey was done. Just a few months later, they realized it wasn't and, by God's grace, my dad had come to grips with that. It might look more desperate, denial, or it might look like Peter forbidding it. "God forbid, my Lord, this must never happen to you. I can't go there. God, I can't go there, friend. I don't need to know how bad it's going to be."

Then we get the response of Jesus. I want you to think a minute about the difficulty of what Jesus has just shared with one of his closest confidants and with the people that he is teaching and walking alongside. This is the first time where Jesus puts to words what he knows will happen, and what he knows he will have to endure. Can you imagine how much courage it took Jesus to claim his story?

If you've never had to hold on to a difficult truth and then finally gotten the courage, the nerve to share it out loud, the last thing that you need is for someone to diminish your story.

When you've gotten the nerve to finally say this is my truth, the last thing you need is for someone to say "God forbid it." That's not what Jesus needs.

Jesus rightly, I think, responds "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." It is a strong, harsh response. It is focused on Peter, but my imagination tells me that Jesus is also speaking to those voices of fear and shame that he has been battling in order just to speak his truth.

I wonder if we focus a little too much on what he said to Peter instead of focusing on what he didn't say.

He didn't tell Peter, "Go back to the boats. Remember those nets full of fish. Go back there. Go back there and become a fisherman again. You're not cut out for this."

He didn't tell Peter that just because he couldn't take in the full truth of the matter that he had no place with him anymore. Instead, he told him to get behind him. Fall in line. Jesus doesn't abandon Peter. He says, "Get behind me. I'll take the lead. I'll take the lead into this difficult but true space that we are walking."

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It strikes me, Beloved, that this is the good news that can be found in grief, even in denial. The God that we know in Jesus Christ has not abandoned Peter. He has not abandoned us. Christ is our companion in the journey of grief, and that doesn't mean that it is not going to be excruciating. It doesn't mean that it is not going to be heartbreaking. It doesn't mean that it's not going to be exhausting,

but it does mean that we have a partner journeying this Lenten path with us.

So, if this day, if you are navigating a new diagnosis or a divorce, you've lost your job, or your physical mobility, if you're navigating a death of someone you love or the end of a relationship, if you miss Steve or Faye or countless others that have left us in the last several years, if you are grieving things not being the way that they were, then you need to hear this. You are not alone.

Ted Lasso captivated the public consciousness for the last couple of years. Maybe some of you have seen the television show. It's the tale of a loving, enthusiastic, hyper-positive American football coach turned European football coach. After a particularly heartbreaking loss that led to his team's relegation to a lower, less prestigious league, Lasso addressed his team's grief in this way. He said, "I promise you there is something out there worse than being sad, that's being sad and alone. Ain't no one in this room alone."

To paraphrase Lasso, ain't no one in this sanctuary alone. Ain't no one on that live stream alone. Your journey is unique, your grief particular to you, but you are not alone in it.

The journey of grief, beloved, this is our work to do together. This is the season in which we need to begin it in earnest. We might be like Peter this morning, or we might be like the psalmist. And we might not want to push it aside, or we might want to grow wings and fly away from it, but we must know that as the journey through this season of Lent moves forward and we move towards suffering and we move towards loss and we move towards pain, we do not move through this season alone. We move with the Incarnate One, the one who has brought us to this place this day and who will walk with each and every single one of us and with our community.

And I trust that, on our journey together, we will find what our nation's inaugural youth poet laureate Amanda Gorman so beautifully articulated. "We will find that grief commands its own grammar structured by intimacy and imagination. We often say we are beside ourselves with grief we can't even imagine. This means that anguish can call us to envision more than we believed was carriable or even sustainable."

This is to say, Beloved, that there does exist a good grief.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.

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