

A Sermon on the Five Stages of Grief

For those of you who know me know it is not often when I don't know what to say. I don't always say the right thing, I don't always say the smartest thing, but for some reason my mouth just keeps going. But now I need to admit this sermon, this time, our world, basically has left me speechless.

I chose to read Psalm 22 today, because it echoes Jesus' last 7 words on the cross. The psalm begins with a psalmist agonizing for being forsaken and alone, yet ends with praise and exaltation of God. The beginning of Psalm 22 is considered the fourth words of Jesus from the cross. In his book, The Hope of Glory, historian John Meacham writes:

"Light in the darkness, life from death rescue from tribulation such ,are the promises of psalm 22 and 1 supposes of God the father through the momentary forsaking of the Sun. It is hardly surprising that the rawest of words of the crucifixion should perhaps tell us the most about the divine meaning of Golgotha a place of violence and hatred transformed into the manifestation of an indescribable (agape) love."

First Peter again shows the difficulty life often brings to us. Tragedies are usually perceived as individual circumstances, or national crises, but in this time the world is living the same tragedy.

So how do we cope, cry, call out, and care? How can we diminish or ease our anxiety, alarm, and angst?

David Kessler and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross have been the scientists and doctors behind the psychological studies and books on the Five Stages of Grief. I want to examine our world's situation using these stages of grief as a foundation for assessing our circumstances.

The first stage is denial: and I am quoting here from the Kessler-Kubler-Ross website www.grief.com "**Denial** is the first of the five stages of grief. It helps us to survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We go numb. We wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, why we should go on. We try to find a way to simply get through each day. Denial and shock help us to cope and make survival possible. Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. There is a grace in denial. It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle. As you accept the reality of the loss and start to ask yourself questions, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process. You are becoming stronger, and the denial is beginning to fade. But as you proceed, all the feelings you were denying begin to surface."

When these feelings surface, the first emotion most recognized is **anger** and anger is okay, in fact, it is necessary. This anger can extend to your family, friends, strangers, petty annoyances and painful moments and God. It is this anger and frustration which causes Jesus and each of us to ask, "Why?" "Why God have you

forsaken us?" This anger is a way of naming our loss and love of what has come before.

Then we will **bargain**. "Please God, if you will change these circumstances I will, "fill in the blank." We become lost in a maze of "If only..." or "What if..." statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want to go back in time. Which of us does not want to make that happen right now? Who among us has not wished some person, or government, or God, did not step in sooner to stop this virus. We "what if" ourselves and others, but we realize this bargaining is of no help at all.

This causes the fourth stage, **depression**. Again I will quote Dr. Kessler, "After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It's important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss." When this loss fully settles in our souls, the realization that pre-corona virus world is not coming back it is understandably depressing. If grief is a process of healing, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along this path of healing. The sadness and emptiness in our lives and souls will not go away for a very long time, if ever. With the realization of this tragedy will come with the fifth stage of **acceptance**.

Acceptance may be confused with the notion of being all right or okay. This is not the case. We will never feel OK about the loss of all these human lives, we will never accept the pain of economic despair, it will never be all right to be unable to hug grandchildren, or miss funerals, to not host a celebration for a graduation or wedding. We will never like this reality or make it OK, we will accept it at this moment.

But it is only a moment, Good Friday leads to Easter Sunday. Hope is where we live and know the promise of Jesus Christ, "I am with you always."

We do not know what the future will look like. What each of us will need though is a pair of "Fresh Eyes." Watch this video by pop singer, Andy Grammar, who is an advocate for the homeless.

People are first physically changed, with shampoo and scissors, clothing and care. But when you look closely you see they are changed emotionally by seeing themselves anew in the mirror and then by others' reaction to them. We will all need fresh eyes. We will need to live in a world where our loved ones may have died, where our jobs no longer exist, where children's education is different.

The five stages of grief are not linear or time specific. Each day, many of us, I certainly do, can go through all five, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Life has been forever changed and we must readapt. We must learn to reorganize roles, re-assign them to others or take them on ourselves. We can make new connections, new meaningful relationships, new inter-dependencies. We will be the church of Jesus Christ in this new world to be.

Let us go forward as in this time, with fresh eyes and using the words of Psalm 121 as our affirmation "I lift my eyes (my fresh eyes) to the hills---from where will my help come?"

My Help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Amen

Debby Madden, March 26, 2020