

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

ON HANDLING GRIEF

"He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we in turn may be able to comfort others in any trouble of theirs and to share with them the consolation we ourselves receive from God."

II Corinthians 1:4 (NEB)

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II Corinthians 1:4 (NEB)

All the happenings that flail the mind and bruise the human spirit are not broad-gauged or what the world calls big. The Watergate affair and the Arab-Israeli stare-down deserve every headline they capture.

But we are taxed as much, if not more, by losses and afflictions closer to home that society-at-large will little note nor long remember. While learning to cope with events that comprise "world history" we cannot afford to leave unmanaged the turbulence created when events in our "personal history" go awry!

The Bible has endured in large measure because it has helped men and women to deal with the unwelcome. An early settlement of Christians was under heavy affliction. Besides the ills that flesh is heir to, those early believers knew too well the strains that faith is called upon to bear.

This is how St. Paul addressed them: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (II Cor. 1:3-4) While Paul is not speaking exclusively of death, I should like us to consider his words as they relate to our need to handle grief.

* * *

Lest it go unnoticed, let me point out first that faith makes bold to deal with death. In the church

the subject is not glossed over, the word is not avoided. In most any service of Christian worship a gathered congregation is brought face to face with life's large questions. Whether by song or word or symbol, week by week, year by year, we are asked, "Where did I come from?" "Why am I here?" "Where am I going?" Riverside goes on to actually program the ultimate question of death. We have a Memorial Society in this church. We also have an organization called Horizons that tries to make us come to terms with death and dying.

I say this because society has a way of repressing or avoiding the subject. It's almost as though there were a conspiracy of silence out there. The average man prefers to deal in "middle language." He likes to think and talk about his next meal, his next suit of clothes, his next trip, his next pay raise, the next election. The larger why and who are studiously avoided.

In the Snows of Kilimanjaro, Ernest Hemingway has given us some telling insights into the workings of human nature. In that story Harry and his wife are trapped in Africa. Harry is an old writer who has a few more stories in his blood that he wants to get down on paper. But he contracts a leg infection there in that distant land. The wound is becoming increasingly gangrenous. To make matters worse the truck in which they were traveling breaks down.

In this siege of adversity Harry's wife turns to him and says, "I don't see why that had to happen to your leg. What have we done to have that happen to us?" Harry replies, "I suppose what I did was to forget to put iodine on it when I first scratched it. Then I didn't pay any attention to it because I never infect. Then when it got bad it was probably using that weak carbolic solution when the other antiseptics ran out that paralyzed the minute blood vessels and started the gangrene." He pauses and looks at her and asks, "What else?" She replies, "I don't mean that." Harry

goes on, "If we would have hired a good mechanic instead of a half-baked kikuyu driver, he would have checked the oil and never burned out that bearing in the truck." His wife still unsatisfied, says again, "I don't mean that." 1

Some years ago James Barrie wrote a play that he called, "The Will." In it a husband and wife go to a lawyer to draw up a will. She is so tearful that her husband and the lawyer try to prepare the will without ever mentioning the words "death" or "widow," or anything to suggest that the husband might not live forever. 2

I think Walter Kaufman has summed it up very well: "We regularly emphasize the accidental cause of death, the mishap, the disease, the infection, the advanced age, and thus betray our eagerness to demote death from a necessity to a mere accident." 3

When our time comes to handle grief as Christians, the subject will not take us unawares. It is regularly in our sermons, in our hymns, in our prayers and in our symbols. The very fact that we worship as Christians on the first day of the week hails our belief in resurrection. The fact that the Church Year contains an "All Saints Sunday" reflects a courage on the subject that is hardly common in the world.

* * *

What is the burden of Paul's word to these afflicted Corinthians? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions." Apparently his first concern was to fix their gaze on God. He does not begin with an analysis of their afflictions or a discussion as to whether those afflictions are meritable. He starts where faith should start -- with God, who He is and what He does.

"Blessed be God." What an opening for a message

to people in distress. He moves on to give three identifying ascriptions of God. God is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Nothing is more critical for us in our seasons of grief than the view we hold of God. He is to be understood within the church as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The lens through which we look at God as Christians is Jesus. We hear Him saying to us in our moments of heaviest anguish, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." (John 14:9)

He is also the "Father of mercies," -- that is, the one from whom merciful acts proceed. "He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." (Ps. 103:10)

He is also to be understood as "the God of all comfort." He is with us in what we experience, not remote or peering down unfeelingly. The God of all comfort.

Abraham Heschel, whose saintly presence and sage counsel is sorely missed here on the Heights, was fond of saying that "The Bible is God's anthropology not man's theology." The intent of Scripture is to show how much God is identified with us and with what transpires in the human story. The Bible is not primarily speculative. It is not concerned about what God is like in His essence, His nature, His timeless qualities, but rather to help us understand that God is present with us, sharing with us our life. At the very heart of the universe, and we must remember this in our moments of affliction, is a never-failing fountain of mercy and comfort.

John Baillie put it this way, "God meets us on a family, rather than on a forensic basis. His dealings with us are not legal but parental. We are not under the law, but under grace. This means simply that what reigns at the center of the spiritual universe is not overbearing Power, nor yet calculating justice, but rather outgoing love." 4

* * *

Paul follows then with a statement of what God does because of what He is. "He comforts us in all our afflictions." It is not enough in our times of grief and bereavement to simply call up our own reserves of nerve and courage. At any rate, we do this instinctively. Whatever wits we have, whatever we've read, whatever our thoughts on life and death have been, these come home to serve us. But Paul is saying something more. He is alerting us to the prospect of an investment of help from without. Something more is in the picture than what we bring to it. Testimonies are legion in Christian history as to how men and women and boys and girls discovered in some extremity a plus that was not of their own making that could only be attributed to God.

At times we torture ourselves unfairly by pre-imagining some great loss without at the same time pre-imagining the comfort of God that would meet us in that experience. He bears our sorrows with us. In our afflictions he is afflicted. Why else would He have laid upon the Prophet Isaiah the message. "Comfort, comfort my people saith your God. Priests, speak to the heart of Jerusalem and comfort it. For its humiliation has reached its goal and its sin is remitted." (Is. 40:1, LXX)

When a sorrow is shared it becomes "thinned out." As it becomes more widely distributed it becomes more bearable. What shall we say when that distribution includes God Himself?

Shakespeare knew the lift that comes from a diffused sorrow. In "King Lear" he gives these words to Edgar:

"When we our betters see bearing our woes,
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
Who alone suffers suffers most i' the mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind:
But then the mind much sufferance doth
o'erskip
When grief hath mates and bearing fellowship.

How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the
king bow;" 5

* * *

Paul's first concern was to fix their gaze on God. His second concern was to direct their care to others. "God who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." Grief tends to be self-encompassing and self-absorbing. It requires strong counsel to get us out of ourselves and into the needs of others. We have a duty to the living as well as to the dead. Once we have felt the strengthening arms of God beneath us we are then enjoined to throw our arms around another.

It isn't always easy in our society to know where the grieving and afflicted are. One of the sad aspects of modern city life is that people can die and be buried without the rest of us being aware. Years ago in this neighborhood it was customary for a family that had suffered a loss to place a wreath or bouquet of flowers on the door-post of the main entrance to the building. As youngsters, when we saw those flowers we showed our concern and respect by not playing directly in front of that house for a few days. We tried to remember not to run through the halls or otherwise disturb. It was the community's way, however poorly, of acknowledging that the bells had tolled for us.

Flowers are no longer posted on tenement doors but hearts are still in need of the kind of comfort that we received from God when we were crushed. When we really care we will know where such folk are.

What we do when we get there will be given us in that hour. It is my experience that what is really required when death strikes is not more talk -- God knows we have enough of that -- but a willingness to practice what might be called "the ministry of standing by."

Just being there can help. Just saying "yes" when the bereaved wife offers more coffee. Just entering into some of the light conversation that is generated to crowd out the awful dimensions of our loss.

I remember being called to a home that had just learned of a son's loss in Vietnam. The father was a marginal member of the church, the mother a more active one. This was an only son. He had been groomed to work with his father and then to take over the father's business. I had never spent any time with this family socially. There were few points of common remembrance on which I might build. I wondered what I would do or say. How can one be helpful in such straits! When I got there I found that words were not that important. They knew that I didn't want to be there. No one really wants to be in the tense atmosphere of abject grief. And so we experienced a shared silence, punctuated now and then by quiet remarks on life and death. The family understood that the church cared. God's comfort was mediated. A heavy weight had become a bit more bearable.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all of our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any afflictions, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

All of this, as you have suspected, was written within the context of the Christian hope that life in Christ can never end. We surmise that the living and the dead share the same reality. The sphere of each is "interblended" with the other.

A refugee priest of the Russian Orthodox Church once spent some time in Manchester, England. He asked for the privilege of visiting different churches in that city, to see how British people worshipped. One of the local ministers eventually asked him, "What is the greatest difference between the worship we do and your own?" Without any hesitation this Russian Ortho-

dox priest said, "Your heaven is so empty. When a Christian of the Eastern Orthodox tradition prays and worships God he sees himself not as a solitary individual approaching a solitary God, but as a member of a divine community approaching God surrounded by His angels and His saints." 6

On every Sunday, but on this Sunday especially, let us warm to the truth that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses with whom we share a common worship of the same God:

The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ;
The Father of mercies;
The God of all comfort.
May He keep us in His peace. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hemingway, Ernest, The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Short Stories, p. 6, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1927.
2. Barrie, Sir James, "The Will," quoted in "The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter," Vol. 52, No. 10, October, 1971, Montreal.
3. Kaufmann, Walter, The Faith of A Heretic, p. 357, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1960.
4. Baillie, John, The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity, p. 50, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1929.
5. Shakespeare, William, "King Lear," Act III, Scene VI, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, p. 1049, Walter J. Black, New York.
6. DuToit, Lionel, Dean of Carlisle, "The Expository Times," p. 25, October 1963, England.

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