

Outreach in Times of Grief

by Rachel Kennell Mumme

Think about a time when you have experienced grief. Perhaps it was the loss of a job; perhaps it was because of a move or relocation; maybe it was a painful divorce; maybe someone you dearly loved died suddenly or after a long illness. Whatever your particular struggle, there are often some common components to grief: sadness, anger, crying, guilt, moodiness, perhaps even depression. Sometimes these feelings come right away; sometimes they show up later and sometimes never at all.

Whatever your reaction, your life is never the same as it was before grief. For you and for those around you, this can be an extremely challenging time. With good intentions, you and they want the “old” you back, only now a “new” you is being formed.

In these times of grief, you may have heard some of the following phrases spoken: “Time heals all wounds,” or “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” or “I know *just* how you feel—I remember when...”. Such words, while typically uttered with care and concern, often leave the hearer with a gaping wound and no one to help the healing. Much of the well-intentioned comfort that is offered can be likened to putting a band-aid on an amputated limb! Band-aids have a purpose, but are not what’s needed here.

“So, what?” you wonder? “Everyone grieves so differently, it’s impossible to know how to help someone else, especially someone who isn’t a Christian. I mean, I just don’t know what people do in a hard time when they don’t have faith.” Let’s ponder that: where does comfort come from for those outside of faith in Christ?

Grief is unique for each person and that recognition is a fantastic start to helping someone who is in the depths of it. Those who are grieving are often more open to looking beyond themselves for relief from that pain. They seek comfort in busyness, in unhealthy relationships, in addictions, and in other things. For most, true comfort does not come but is replaced by anger or abuse or bitterness. There is still something missing, something that will lead to the peace so desperately needed. What many suffering unbelievers don’t yet recognize is that they are not searching for *something*, but for *someone*. And that someone is Jesus.

Tips

In the first part of this article, you reflected on a time of grief in your own life. As we begin now to talk of reaching out to the grieving, understanding our own suffering in light of the cross of Christ is a good place for us to begin. Richard C. Eyer writes in *Pastoral Care Under the Cross* about how to help those who are suffering. “Pastoral care consists not in removing someone’s suffering but in helping the sufferer to learn to interpret his or her sufferings in light of the cross” (p.24). (Eyer earlier clarifies pastoral care – “I am writing especially to pastors, but others may also benefit from this book: Christian men and women such as deaconesses, nurses, doctors, social workers and all who bear one another’s burdens in the name of Jesus Christ” (p.10).)

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. What kind of a God would send His own Son to suffer and die for those who rejected Him? For those outside of Christ, there is something very wrong with that picture. But it is by that very cross we have everything in Jesus Christ and in Him crucified. So without Christ there *is* no sense in suffering. And with Him we have all that we need even in the midst of grief. Our world and even many Christian churches give us a different message: *those who are the real believers—the good people of the world—they’ll be blessed with material wealth and happy families and good health, and if they aren’t ... well it’s either a sad misfortune or they must have done something for which they are now being punished.*”

This is a wrong and dangerous thought because it does not account for suffering, but instead puts a focus on us—what we do and what we have. Richard Eyer explains the difference between a theology of glory and theology of the cross in this way:

The cross is the focal point of our redemption and the paradigm for living faithfully in the midst of suffering. In antithesis to the theology of the cross, the theology of glory views the Christian faith as a tool to accomplishing great things, not the least of which is the overcoming of all suffering. Faith, according to the theology of glory, is a utilitarian means to health, wealth, and success—a faith that sees no place for Christ in the midst of suffering, either His or ours. However, the Christian faith is not a tool to this end but a caring arm extended to the suffering. If God gives healing here and now, good and well. If not, He will in the end. Meanwhile, it is the task of Christian caregivers to walk with people in their suffering and to point them to the cross where they find healing for the inner person, even though the outer person may be wasting away. (p. 149)

There are entire books written on what to say (and what not to say) to those who are grieving. There are no magic words that bring healing, but the Lord promises to bring healing in His own time. Below are four actions that can be helpful when reaching out to those who are grieving. These do not follow a particular order, but are rather different components of care under the cross of Christ. For it is through that cross, through Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, that He gives LIFE to those who believe in His name!

L: Listen. Here is one of the most powerful tools you have—your two ears! Many people do not have someone who will listen, really listen, to their pain. To take time to do this may raise the question of “why do you care so much?” What a wonderful opportunity to tell of Christ’s love and forgiveness that take away your sin and help to heal your pain! Listening lets the grieving person unload some of the burden they carry. “Suffering people often want to talk about their situation and feelings and frequently will talk—if we let them. Good questions can open gushers and then healing begins, in part because you are gaining information with which to help the person but mostly because he or she is talking and you are listening” (Haugk 92).

I: Interact. As you reflect on your own grief, think about the calls, cards, and letters that may have come your way right away and then how the loneliness and grief that set in later was met with a silent phone and empty mailbox. Continuing to interact with those who are grieving helps to foster that relationship and allows for care to continue as a person walks through various stages of grief. Such interaction provides a constant in a world of upheaval and change. And that constant is Jesus Christ, who remains the same!

F: Follow through. Our world is full of broken promises: I promise to love you for better or worse; I promise to call you later; I promise to take out the trash; I promise to do my homework; I promise ... In such a world, it is easy to lose faith in any kind of promises made, especially in the face of grief. Christ makes promises to us that He will always be with us, that His grace is enough for us, that He

comforts us in all our troubles. These are the promises that are never broken. One way to help someone who is grieving see those promises is to follow through on our own. “Caring is action, not just good intentions. Caring occurs when you express your good intentions through loving—and appropriate—deeds. Fulfill caring actions effectively and they bring hope and encouragement to the sufferer. Do them less effectively and they may not be everything you had wanted them to be” (Haugk 85).

E: Empathize. Empathy is defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; *also*: the capacity for this” (Merriam-Webster online). Empathy often means affirming someone else’s feelings. In order for healing to take place it is important to have recognition that healing is needed. If we deny the grieving person’s feelings, trying to offer “comfort” by telling them it’s really not so bad after all, then healing has no place to begin. Jesus heals our brokenness, not our health. Jesus tells us in Matthew 9:12 that *“it is not the healthy to need a doctor, but the sick.”* To empathize with someone, to affirm their feelings, shows that they are being heard, that they are not alone. And in that newly forged bond of shared suffering is a door to the suffering of Christ. He, too, shares in our suffering, “comforting us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Corinthians 1:4-5).

There is no better comfort we can offer someone who is grief stricken than the comfort Christ Himself gives to us—not in distant or detached ways, not in glossed over words, but in the fullness of Christ Himself, in all He gives through water and the Word, through His Body and Blood. *“With His wounds, we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5).

Jesus tells us that He came into this world *“that we may have LIFE, and have it to the full”* (John 10:10). Fullness, full healing, does not come without Christ. There is no substitute—not pop psychology, not spirituality, not keeping busy, not a flowery card. It is in Christ and in Him alone that our hope is found. No Christ crucified? Then no comfort. A suffering Jesus? That’s where comfort is found! It all seems backwards with Jesus—the King of the universe humbling Himself to be born in a manger, the perfect Lamb dying the death of the wretched sinners. And it is that backwardness—that foolishness of the cross—that is the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18).

So as you offer LIFE to an unbeliever in grief, think on your own suffering, and more importantly, think on Christ’s. For it is in His suffering that He makes Himself known to us. “As much as parishioners may want to see the hand of God in nature’s beautiful sunrises, moving stories of conversions, or successes in parish programs, it is in the cross of Christ and in bearing their own crosses that God chooses to reveal his heart to them” (Eyer 27).

Questions for Discussion:

How have I seen God in my suffering?

What have other people said to me in times of grief that have been helpful? Hurtful?

How do my experiences with grief impact the way I reach out to someone else who is grieving?

Where in Scripture do we see examples of Jesus reaching out to those who are grieving?

Who do I know who is grieving or going through a difficult time?

In what *specific* ways can I offer LIFE to unbelievers around me who are grieving?

Resources:

Eyer, Richard. *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*. Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO. 1994.

This book is a wonderful resource, not only for pastors and church workers, but for anyone who asks and is asked the 'why' questions of God and suffering.

Haugk, Kenneth. *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*. Stephen Ministries: St. Louis, MO. 2004.

Haugk is the founder of Stephen Ministries, a ministry designed to help those who are going through difficult times. This book is based on research done with those who are suffering, and offers advice on what to say and what not to say.

Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense out of Suffering*.

Kreeft is a Catholic theologian and apologist who here gives thoughtful insights into suffering and its mysteries. He writes in a style that is often compared to C.S. Lewis.

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. HarperCollins Publishing: San Francisco, CA. 1940.

Lewis brings hope and healing to those who struggle with the questions of suffering.

Author Bio:

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Currently, I am serving as Director of Discipleship and Outreach at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Brookfield, WI. I have been here since February of 2001, after completing my deaconess training through Concordia University, River Forest, IL. I am also finishing my masters degree from Concordia St. Paul in the Master of Arts in Christian Outreach program. This May, I will be getting married and moving to Hampton, IA to finish out vicarage with my fiancée (well, he'll be my husband then...), and then we will move to St. Louis for his 4th year of Seminary. My new last name will be Mumme.

