



GIVE GRIEVERS TIME, SPACE, AND COMPANIONSHIP

“Good grief!” That’s the famous catchphrase of Charlie Brown, heartbeat of the charming *Peanuts* comic strip gang. It’s also a common expression in Minnesota, where both the *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles Schulz and I grew up. But while Charlie Brown and Minnesotans say “Good grief!” in lots of different circumstances, it is an all-purpose expression of exasperation more than any kind of endorsement that grief is actually good.

After all, grief is “intense sorrow caused by loss of a loved one, especially by death; something that causes great unhappiness.” It is hard to see any good in that. Yet it is there, and the Bible can help us find it, as we take note of National Grief Awareness Day tomorrow, August 30.

This observance was started by Angie Cartwright in 2014, to raise awareness of the many ways in which individuals cope with loss, to offer resources to those going through personal losses, and to remind us to support people we know who are grieving. Cartwright has suffered the loss of several family members, and knows firsthand that grief can be a very lonely, unpredictable, misunderstood place.

In spite of theories such as “The Five Stages of Grief” made famous by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, grief is still mysterious. People remain uneasy, awkward, and often standoffish with those wading through the devastation and disorientation it brings. And this is most unfortunate, since grief comes to us all, sooner or later. Thankfully, the Bible helps us weather grief and support those who grieve, through simple examples of do’s and don’ts.

In the Old Testament book of Job, we find the book’s namesake mired in the deepest grief imaginable. He suffered the sudden death of all his children, and expressed his grief by tearing his robe and shaving his head. Yet, he “fell to the ground in worship”, saying, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed

be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:20-21). Turning toward God instead of away from Him in a time of grief is a key “do.”

Soon afterward, Job also lost his wealth and health. All this prompted three of Job’s friends to visit him. This is the essential “do” for comforters: simply show up. For seven days they just kept him company, saying nothing. This is another “do”: just be there, and listen.

But then Job’s friends commit a compound, hurtful “don’t”: they try, at great length, to explain Job’s predicament spiritually, and fix it (Job 3-25). A contemporary version of this salt-on-the-wound response would be to say, “I know how you feel”, “God needed another angel”, or “There’s a reason for everything.” Saying “I love you” or “I’m here for you” is far more comforting and far less presumptuous.

Jesus, too, showed us the value of just being present in someone’s grief. He went to see his dear friends Martha and Mary at the death of their brother Lazarus, and He wept with them (John 11:1-35). He knew they needed empathy, not platitudes, and He lovingly entered into their pain with them.

Later, Jesus sought the companionship of his close disciples as He faced the loss of his own life, saying, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch” (Mark 14:34). The text notes that “They did not know what to say to him.” We have all felt like that. But grieving people probably won’t remember what you said, just that you were there for them, especially for the long haul, since grieving takes time. As we allow space and time for someone to grieve in whatever way comes naturally to them, we imitate Jesus, who knew grief himself, and never tried to squelch or hurry it.

Grief is a fact of life, a cost of love. So, like Jesus, Christians grieve, but not like those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). For in heaven “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). May that hope sustain you as a griever, and imbue you as a comforter.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux