

“Good Grief!”

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 31:9-10; Revelation 20: 1-4

Dr. Geordie Campbell

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A single phrase from one of the world’s great philosophers comes with me today. In vintage Peanuts language two words pop up in the script whenever things don’t go right for Charlie Brown, or when someone says or does something dumb. “Good grief!” Charlie would say. That’s what I want these moments to be about as the kindness of your listening is extended to me once more.

Good grief! Good, because goodness is the primary flavor of life. But grief, too, because in the midst of the goodness losses do come to us – some of them expected and others unbidden. Good, because God made the universe and authored our lives in benevolence. But grief, because a part of the package of being human are times of sadness and mourning. Good, because all that we are given to live was formed with the blessing and love of our Maker. But grief, because there are occasions when we hurt.

These recent days carried a rich sadness for Pam, surely, and also for me. Sunday night we drove through the dark to Pam’s hometown of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. We arrived in time for her to spend the next twenty hours with her mother who suffered a stroke on Labor Day – this after a long summer of decline. She was, we were, there for those essential moments of the family sort; though June, Pam’s mom, was unconscious and unresponsive as she had been for two weeks. Her breathing grew more and more shallow and erratic. She became increasingly still. And then everything fell silent as she breathed her last and crossed over.

As you can well imagine we have been on a roller-coaster of sadness, gratitude, and exhaustion ever since. Goodness and grief. Sometimes I have walked this with you in your times of loss as I have had the privilege of being your pastor. And each from our own life stories this we know: death is universal and visits everyone, but each death is intensely personal. It has been so for us.

And so I simply want to reflect today on the experience grief. If you are near such a time yourself perhaps these thoughts will come close. And if you are not, they might help you to be more understanding of others who find themselves in the shadow of goodness and grief.

First: We need to acknowledge that **grief is a process**. It’s a season far more than a brief encounter. It’s not just a passing moment. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes says it so eloquently: “to everything there is a season – a time to be born and a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Note the operative word there is season. And by the count of any calendar a season is measured not by days as much as by months.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was the key pioneer in helping us to understand this. She identified that grief is a process with stages that we might expect to engage. She named five of them: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Others have refined these or altered the language slightly. They have talked about shock, reality, reaction, and recovery. But, regardless of what we call them, what is essential is the time and process that grieving requires.

So grief is a season and we dare not miss it. In fact we pay a high price if we try to pass it by too quickly. But often we do just that because, and this is second now, **grief meets all of us on ground that is not comfortable.** It is unaccustomed. It pushes us from the more controlled environs of our own choosing. It makes us feel grumpy or exhausted or anxious or fearful. We may say and do things we don't normally do or say. We may find stuff welling up from places unknown. We may experience ourselves as sad or numb or sullen.

The Psalmist knew this so very well. In the words of an anguished, lament we are told just how out-of-our-comfort-zone grieving can be. "O Lord, I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also; my strength fails because of my misery." Another Psalm: "I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears. I drench my couch with weeping." None of us like feeling that! And yet life does deliver us to moments of grief; and to avoid it, or deny it, or to push it away is to force all of that important expression and feeling underground. And there it sits until the next time that loss knocks on the door.

Third. **Grief bears an enormous gift.** It's how the healing power of God has its way with us. It's the doorway that leads to some of the deepest experiences that life has to offer. Beyond our logical chains of reasoning and linear ways of thinking, it is what connects us to the common experience of being human.

Frederick Buechner's once wrote about tears, as one of the universal gifts of grief. "You never know what may cause tears. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of someone's old shoes can do it, or a horse cantering across a meadow, or the sight of a favorite basketball team running onto the gym floor. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay attention. They not only tell you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next."¹ What a poignant way to capture the blessing of tears, and the gift of grief!

And then last, at least for now. When all is said and done, **grief leans us toward a new day.** It's hard to feel that in the middle of the muddle, but it's true. The Psalmist again: "Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes in the morning." And that means that moments of grief and loss and sadness and parting and all that goes with them are only a part of the story. Ours is a God of the new day, and God is ever and again turning life toward goodness.

There is a mystery to all of this, and a precious one at that. Please, never to diminish any sense of loss, but to see the larger horizon. The truth is that we grasp only the slightest edge of what it is to die. We see only in a mirror dimly. June told me at breakfast on Labor Day morning that she would be gone before the autumn arrived. She knew something. She died 18 minutes before the end of the summer! Go figure! This is all mystery. We only imagine only what can be on the other side – a new heaven and a new earth, a house with many rooms, a love that transcends. And this is what faith provides, if we dare.

Now I don't know where any of this meets you today. But these are important things to remember and embrace. So, in whatever way, take them to heart or tuck them away for the next

time that you find yourself in need. And please: may we each do so in the name and the spirit of the One who holds us in all manner of goodness and all times of grief. Amen.

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¹ Frederick Buechner. Beyond Words. Harper/San Francisco, 2004, p. 321.