

Acquaintances With Grief  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
August 30, 2009  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
1 Corinthians 13:12-13

Joe Martin was a friend, a boss and a mentor to me.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, the brother of a governor, a PhD in medieval studies, he was an unlikely banker. But Hugh McColl had noticed him early on and came to count on Joe to help identify – and do - the right thing with his bank's power and influence.

When Joe was diagnosed with ALS, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease, it was the cruelest kind of news. Just as his company had reached a point where it could make a real difference, the diagnosis meant that Joe would begin to lose virtually all physical ability, leaving his extraordinary mind trapped in a motion-less body. The doctors told him that most ALS patients die within two to three years of diagnosis.

Those who loved Joe and his wife, Joan, experienced the full spectrum of emotions that come with that kind of news. More than anything, we grieved.

“How do we handle and deal with grief?” That is the question I found in the Summer Sermon Grab Bag – and that question all the more timely this weekend, as many mourn the death of Sen. Ted Kennedy, a true public servant and the scion of a family that has known more than its share of grief.

In the time I have been your pastor, so many of you have lost a loved one. Many of you have lost a parent, as I have. But grief flows out of other types of losses. Perhaps you've lost a relationship. Perhaps you are estranged from a family member. Perhaps you've lost a job and have been separated from the friends there whom you valued.

Perhaps you've lost touch with a place that had been a big part of your life. Perhaps you've lost the ability to do something you love, like travel or exercise, and you miss it deeply.

We don't wear veils or black arm bands as a public sign of mourning, as we once did. So, we can't always tell who among us is grieving. But more of us are than we might think.

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One of the ways we can identify with the stories and characters of scripture is that so many of them felt grief.

Abraham grieves the loss of Ishmael, as does Jacob with Joseph and David with Absalom. Many of the Psalms express profound feelings of disorientation. Isaiah foretells the coming of a messiah who will be a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"—such a poignant description of Christ our Lord. Mary, Martha and the apostles were lost in their despondency after Christ's crucifixion. In these and other stories, scripture mirrors our own lives.

As for us, the inquiry of how we can best handle grief can hardly be covered in just one sermon. That's the way it's been with the grab bag — you ask big questions. I should also say I am not trained as a counselor, though we have good resources here should you need them.

But perhaps there are a few things we can say.

We should start by recognizing that every loss is different and every person is different. So the nature of our reaction to loss will vary based on the relationship. It may vary based on the circumstances — was the loss sudden or expected? And it will vary based on our prior experience with grief.

Having said that, there are elements of grief that are consistent. First may come the shock, our psyche's natural defense mechanism for handling a life-changing loss. But sometime afterward, the shock recedes and the loss sinks in. Some may try not to grieve or tell themselves they don't really need to. Some may try to limit their grief to a few weeks and then move on, but it only postpones the inevitable.

Grief affects the entire person, our eating, our drinking, our sleeping and waking. It can cause shortness of breath or even make us dizzy. It can pound our heads and twist our insides.

Even more, grief takes an emotional toll. One counselor writes that “dealing with feelings in grief is like judo. Instead of opposing forceful feelings we should go with them, and let them flow through us and then out of us.”<sup>1</sup>

Another expert puts it this way: “You can’t go over it. You can’t go under it. You can’t go around it. You can only go through it.”<sup>2</sup>

As time moves on, grief counselors say we should be prepared for the “year of firsts,” that first full cycle of the calendar when we experience holidays, seasons, birthdays and anniversaries without the one we’ve lost. Then there are the secondary losses – those aspects of life that were inextricably tied to the person who is no longer there. Perhaps they are financial, perhaps it was a home or hometown, perhaps it’s a connection to other people.

I should add that grief does have its constructive elements. It gives us a chance to review in full the life of the one we have lost – the stories and legacies we knew first hand and those we hear from others that perhaps we never knew . Most of all, grief is about healing and every instance of grief offers its own kind of healing.

As William Shakespeare wrote in Richard II: “Each substance of grief hath twenty shadows.”

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Today’s Old Testament passage from Ezekiel provides a vivid picture of grief. Ezekiel’s almost psychedelic vision is one of a valley of dry bones, which is what grief can feel like, leaving us lifeless, dismembered and scattered.

We find another aspect of grief in the New Testament passage, which comes from Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. He was writing to a church that going through bitter dispute and division, an experience many of you have known. Paul describes that part of our lives, those times in our lives, when nothing is clear, when it is as if we are looking at the world through a cloudy piece of glass.

Grief is like that, too. Many grief counselors refer to the “fog of grief” as that point in the process when we can’t think or see straight. Perhaps Paul was building on a similar

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<sup>1</sup> [Experiencing Grief](#) by Kenneth C Haugk

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

idea that we find in the Psalms, Lamentations and the Book of Job, each of which uses the same language, saying “ ... my eyes shall waste away” because of grief.

For some, grief goes even further. Our relationship with God feels cut off. We can't talk to God, out of anger, confusion, doubt or sheer disorientation. In these times, we can know that God waits for us because the God who extended unconditional love to humanity, only to be rejected time and again, knows grief even more deeply than we do. Because of that, friends, we can take confidence that God walks with us.

But there is more. God isn't simply present with us in our feelings of dismemberment, when we can't see as far as tomorrow. God literally re-members us, as happened to those dry bones, which represented the people of Israel in their separation from God. God puts us back together. We may not be quite the same as before, but we are renewed.

For the apostle Paul, the sinew that holds us together – and sees us through – is made of three things – faith and hope and love. And those three things were what my friend Joe held on to after his diagnosis.

Joe didn't bypass grief. Instead, he looked even more deeply into the face of God and found the one who suffers with us, the one who defeated death in Christ Jesus.

So Joe wrote what one of his friend's called Joe's alternative “ten commandments:”

1. **Love** life and the people important to your life without condition, without expectation.
2. **Hope** in each moment of every day, because more things are possible than you can imagine.
3. Have **faith** that God will let you know about the next life when this one is done.
4. Build **joy** out of the materials you find within the day, with the help of those who are here to be on your team.
5. Let **laughter** embarrass fear and stupidity, let it heal the hurt in others.
6. Insist on **festivity**, and never miss a good cause for celebration.
7. Keep your **sense of purpose** intact, in sight and in focus.

8. Let your **determination** be contagious.

9. Make **will to live** your will to love.

10. And, until this life truly ends, understand that on any given day – on this day – its **possibilities are endless.**

Joe lived to age 65, outlasting his prognosis by a decade. He continued to do the things he had always done. He spoke out against homophobia, racism and bigotry of every kind. He lobbied congress and started a foundation to help find a cure for ALS. He wrote books, using a computer that allowed him to type with his eyes, because in the end that was all he could move. Most of all, he railed against anyone who said he was “dying of ALS” because he very much lived despite it.

Joe had his down times, to be sure. He was in his own way, acquainted with grief. But he learned how to see through the cloudy glass of life as best he could. He was remembered by God and carried on, in faith and hope and love.

In that, he taught us all how to live beyond our grief and into the story of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.