

## **December 22nd: Grief**

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of December, we’re going to be focusing on a mini series called “Blue Christmas,” because we know that this time of year can be particularly difficult for folks dealing with mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. We’ll take a closer look at these topics with sensitivity and compassion, always aiming to provide hope in the darkness. Before we begin, let’s take a moment to settle in and pray together.

*Compassionate Friend, while on this earth you walked with your disciples and followers throughout many seasons in their lives, including experiences of death and grief. Now you walk with us as our most intimate traveling companions on this journey of faith, in all of the emotions and situations that we encounter. We come to this sanctuary with many kinds of grief on our hearts, we come in need of your loving presence and solidarity. Be with us in these vulnerable moments and renew our strength, we pray. Amen.*

On Monday, our nation suffered our 323rd school shooting of the year, this time in Madison, Wisconsin.

Many of you know that I don’t typically comment on current events in my sermons, and this is because it often takes me a few days or even a few weeks to process my own emotions and gather any information and thoughts—and also because reacting to every single piece of breaking news in our country would be chronically exhausting. I’m just not made to keep up with a 24 hour news cycle.

But this week, this devastating story caught me right as I was thinking about our topic for this meditation, which is the experience of grief, and the impact of grief on our souls.

I don't bring up this shooting to make this into an argument about gun policy or the identity and motive of the shooter—there are plenty of talking heads who get paid to do just that, and I'll gladly leave that to them. I'm not here to advocate for a certain political party or partisan beliefs, but the reality is that kids and teachers went to school on a normal Monday morning, and not all of them came home. Right now, there are some families in Madison who have had their lives forever altered by this act of violence, and the Christmas or holidays that they might have been planning for or looking forward to will look very different this year. There might be presents that were bought but will never be unwrapped, there will be empty seats at the dinner table. There is immense pain and disorientation where there should have been excitement and joy.

I think most of us can only imagine what these grieving families are going through—the shock of this kind of grief is so acute and so utterly devastating.

But unfortunately, grief in general is an almost universal human experience. Almost all of us know what it's like to lose someone we love. Probably all of us know what it feels like to say goodbye to a grandparent, or to bury a beloved pet, or attend a funeral for a friend gone too soon. Some of us might have experienced the loss of a parent, or the passing of a spouse, or even a divorce that was so life changing that it felt like someone died. Some of us might know the pain of losing a child, or have suffered a miscarriage, or have navigated the unexpected ending of a close friendship. Some of us have lived through war, or being separated from our families, or just the injustice that we witness every day in our broken world.

All of that is grief. All of those losses have a deep and lasting impact on our lives—it changes how we see the world, how we conduct our daily routines, and the relationships that make our existence so meaningful.

Our culture sometimes tries to make grief invisible—on the whole, our society is uncomfortable with displays of intense emotion. We confine grief to brief moments like funerals or memorial services or specific holidays, then expect ourselves to return to a sense of normality pretty much immediately. In our capitalistic system, workers might only get three to five days for the loss of an immediate family member, and then are forced back to work and productivity. We repress our sadness, only letting it out in certain private moments, because there is little space in our communities for ritual and support.

And all of that makes grief even harder. All of those factors mean that grief can be an even more isolating and even more disorienting experience.

So if you're feeling any sense of grief this morning, or are going through an experience of loss—I want you to know that you don't have to hide those feelings here. You don't have to pretend that everything is okay if it's not. You don't have to wipe away your tears if you long to let them flow freely. Your grief, whatever it looks like, is sacred.

You might be wondering, what do I mean when I say that grief is sacred?

Well, to answer that, let's take a look at an example from the life of Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, we have various stories that show us that in his adulthood, Jesus developed a deep friendship with three siblings named Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Although they were not part of his inner circle of twelve disciples, Jesus often gathered with his disciples at their house, and they supported his ministry emotionally and likely financially. Jesus cared deeply about these three individuals, and this morning's passage gives us an idea of what these relationships looked like.

Earlier in chapter 11, our text tells us that Lazarus was ill, and his sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him to come quickly so that he could be with them during this time of sickness. Jesus delays his return to the town of Bethany,

potentially because the last time he was in Judea with his disciples he was threatened with death by stoning, but eventually he decides to travel to see Lazarus. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Mary and Martha are angry, and Lazarus has been dead for four days. Martha meets Jesus at the road, and in her grief, she tells Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” A few verses later, when Mary leaves the gathering to find a quiet place to grieve, Jesus follows her, and Mary repeats the words of her sister, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Mary and Martha are in a moment of deep grief, their beloved brother and partner in ministry has only been gone for four days. His loss is still so fresh, so real, so strong. Jesus meets them in this moment of extreme pain, joining them in their desperation and fear. Verses 33 through 35 capture this encounter, our text reads: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. **34** “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. **35** Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept.

In these short verses, here’s what I think Jesus teaches about grief and models for us:

First, grief is a natural human reaction to loss. It’s not something that we can control, and it does not make us weak if we feel a sense of grief over losing something important to us. Grief makes us human. It happens to everyone, regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, race, culture, or personal history. At its core, grief is an experience of love, it is an overflow of affection and appreciation that is no longer able to be directed towards our friend or family member. And so while it is painful, grief is a sign that we are capable of immense connection with each other. Even though Jesus is fully divine, he is also fully human, and the love he has for his friends is real. Grief shows us that humans have so much love to give, we have so much love to share with each other.

Second, experiencing and naming grief is a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but I promise it's true. Our culture tells us that emotions aren't trustworthy or are less than our rational thoughts, but that's not healthy. Grief is an emotion that we feel, both with our minds and with our bodies, and when we allow ourselves to experience the fullness of our God-given emotions, we can be our most authentic selves. When we can recognize grief for what it is, and notice its effects on our lives, we are then able to articulate our needs—we can ask our friends and family members for the kinds of encouragement and support that will enable us to move through grief in healthy ways. Not understanding our own grief or the losses that we've suffered means that we limit our sense of self awareness, and this closes us off from the deep connections that are possible when we share our true feelings with others.

Third, and this is a big one, grief can be a powerful and transformative experience when done in community. When we grieve together, we bear witness to each other's pain. When we hold each other close in these moments of despair, we communicate to each other that we are important to each other—our relationships matter. When we make space for honesty and vulnerability in our friendships and families, we show each other that our souls are safe with each other. Even though Jesus is delayed in reaching Mary and Martha, he doesn't shy away from being with them. The whole village is gathered to be with this family, and Jesus joins in this time of mourning with his full humanity.

Fourth, grief is necessary even if we have hope. What I think is interesting about this passage is that Jesus stops to grieve with his friends while he is on the way to Lazarus' tomb—even though Jesus knows that he intends to bring Lazarus back from the dead. Jesus knows that there will be reason to rejoice, and he is just moments away from celebration, but it was still important to Jesus that he take the time to grieve. Jesus weeps, even though he knows what is coming. Some of us might see this and try to claim that his tears were wasted, but I don't think Jesus sees it that way. I think Jesus shows us that we

can be hopeful about something, or be excited about a new situation, and hold grief at the same time. We can hold those two things in tension, because grief does not deny the reality of hope, and hope does not dismiss the reality of grief.

And finally, grief is an important step towards peace. The truth is that some forms of grief never really go away. We may learn to deal with them, and we may return to our normal routines, but some losses will affect us for the rest of our lives. You might be thinking that grief and peace are total opposites, and on the surface, you might be right. The anguish we feel during moments of intense grief is definitely not peaceful, and the lingering pain that we feel can be at odds with our longing for resolution and contentment. If you are experiencing grief this holiday season, I can only imagine that those feelings have colored all of your other experiences—it probably feels difficult to sing, dance, enjoy a meal, or spend time with loved ones when grief is like a dark cloud following you everywhere.

But even if grief doesn't fully resolve, peace is still possible. The fourth Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Peace—a day when we light the fourth candle around our Advent wreath and await a time when our broken world finds an end to our brokenness, division, and conflict. In the light of this candle, we remember God's promise of a future where death and pain are no more, and all tears will cease. So while we wait for Jesus' birth, in the midst of grief, I'll leave us with these words of hope.

In some of our biblical texts, Jesus is referred to as the Prince of Peace—this is a title that is bestowed upon him that originates from an ancient prophecy in Isaiah chapter 9. In this prophetic text, the prophet Isaiah calls for a future Messiah, and out of his own pain, our biblical author offers this encouragement:

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.”

My friends, Jesus’ birth doesn’t diminish your current grief, but it is a sign that God is making all things new. If you are struggling this holiday season with any kind of loss, I invite you to trust that our Messiah is coming for you, he will weep with you, and he is working to bring peace to our world.

Let us continue to walk faithfully in the darkness and look for the light.

Amen.