

Sermon – Enlarging Your Soul Through Grief and Loss
Sunday August 30, 2020

Today, we're going to talk about loss. We're all experiencing loss on many levels.

Because of this pandemic,

- You've lost connections with people. You can't see them, be with them or hug them in the same way. (And "air hugs" just aren't the same!)
- You've lost opportunities. Opportunities to travel, opportunities for your kids, opportunities for a relationship, for your business, for your future.
- Many of you have lost jobs and income.
- Maybe you've lost your health.
- Some of you have lost a loved one.

How are you doing? What is one loss you're feeling at this time? (Type your answer in the chat.)

There's a saying we often quote. We use it when people are going through a hard time. These words come from the German philosopher Nietzsche. But many of you will know it from the lyrics of a Kelly Clarkson song.

Do you know the quote I'm talking about?

What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.

This quote sounds so nice doesn't it? And it's well-intentioned. But do you think it's true? Is it a given that your loss will automatically make you a stronger person?

I'm not so sure about that. Because I've seen people go through hard times. And many of them didn't come out stronger.

Maybe you lost something in the past. You lost a dream, a relationship, an opportunity. That was years ago, but even now you're still frozen in that moment. And now, years later you're still living your life out of that loss, out of that anger, out of that hurt.

Gerald Sittser, who's a professor, lost his wife, his daughter and his mother in the same car accident. Three generations of women taken from him. And the drunk driver was never convicted.

How would you feel if you experienced that kind of loss?

Years later, he wrote a book called *Grace Disguised*. In it, he writes,

"The experience of loss does not have to be the defining moment in our lives. Instead the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens to us that matters so much as what happens in us... It is therefore not true that we become less through loss—unless we allow the loss to make us less... Loss can also make us more... It depends on the choices we make."

We've all experienced loss. But that loss doesn't have to define you. Your defining moment can be how you choose to respond to that loss.

So how do you grieve your loss so that you don't become bitter and cynical but instead more hopeful and more loving? How can your losses make you *more* the person you were made to be instead of *less*?

We're in a series called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

The story of Gerald Sittser actually inspired a chapter in Pete Scazzero's book of the same name which this series is based on. The title of that chapter as well as this message is *Enlarging your Soul through Grief and Loss*.

Have you noticed that our world doesn't handle suffering well? Whenever bad things happen, we feel like it's an alien invasion; like it's an interruption to our happy lives. And the message you and I have internalized when it comes to loss is simply this, *just get over it*. Suck it up, tough it out.

But how do you get over the pain? The most common way people do this is through addictions. Not only to things like drugs, alcohol and pornography. But also to things like:

- Work
- Food
- Shopping
- The internet

Why are these addictions so tempting? Because they distract us from our problems and numb us from the pain.

Pete Scazzero says that the church has very little theology when it comes to anger, depression and loss. As a result, many of us are still carrying wounds that affect us today.

But the Bible has a lot to say about loss. Loss isn't something to just "get over." **Loss is a major discipleship issue.** In the Bible,

- There's a whole book written on loss by the prophet Jeremiah called Lamentations.
- 70 percent of the Psalms are lament psalms that express sorrow and pain.
- Even Jesus offered up petitions with loud cries and tears.

Loss is an important part of your discipleship. And do you know what happens when you learn to grieve well? God enlarges your soul. He shapes you to become more like Jesus.

The story of Job is a great example of this. This book is a dramatic story about loss. You see, Job was an incredible man. Job chapter one says,

This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. ² He had seven sons and three daughters, ³ and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. (Job 1:1-3)

His great numbers of livestock were a sign of his great wealth. Not only did he have thousands of sheep and oxen, he also had thousands of camels. Owning a camel back then was like owning a Rolls Royce. You only had one if you were extremely rich – and Job has 3,000 of them!

If Forbes was around back then, Job would have been at the top of the richest person list – right up there with Bill Gates and Warren Buffet.

But not only is he extremely wealthy, he's also extremely godly.

God himself says,

"There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." (1:8)

So why all these details? Because we soon learn that Job will lose everything in one day!

- He loses his children. His 10 children die in a terrible accident.
- He loses his wealth. His livestock and livelihood are taken away. He goes from riches to rags.
- He loses his health. He gets sores all over his body. And it's so bad he has to scrape them with a piece of broken pottery just to relieve the pain.

But at least Job still has his wife, right? Well, his wife is still alive, but their marriage is a wreck. She's lost everything! Her 10 children are gone. Her husband is covered with boils. She's done with God! She actually tells Job to curse God and die!

So Job has lost everything – his family, his health and his livelihood. And the hardest part isn't even that his loss is so great. The hardest part is that his suffering is undeserved. There's no connection between his suffering and his sin. This is his greatest struggle.

We can all learn how to grieve well by looking at the life of Job. Because at the end of the book – SPOILER ALERT - his faith is restored and his soul is enlarged. He actually grows through his loss.

How does he do it? He goes through 3 stages.

- He pays attention,
- He lives in the in-between
- He lets the old birth the new.

The first stage is **Paying attention**.

The bulk of this book is about Job paying attention to all his negative emotions. He says things like,

If my misery could be weighed,
if you could pile the whole bitter load on the scales,
It would be heavier than all the sand of the sea!
Is it any wonder that I'm screaming like a caged cat?
The arrows of God Almighty are in me,
poison arrows—and I'm poisoned all through!
God has dumped the whole works on me. (Job 6:1-4, *The Message*)

Notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say,

- I know I should be thankful.
- I know there are people starving in Africa with no food to eat.
- I know God is in control and I'll be okay.

You see, one of the biggest mistakes we make is when we deny our pain. How do we do this?

One way is by **pretending the pain doesn't exist**. We do this to protect ourselves because we think, if I deny the pain, then maybe I won't feel it. You know who's really good at this? Men. *Pain? What pain? This broken arm? I'll just walk it off...*

Another way we do this is by **minimizing our pain**. We acknowledge the problem but we don't admit how deeply it really affects us. *Yeah, this situation sucks but it's not that bad!*

But rather than deny or minimize his pain, what does Job do? He pays attention to it. He notices what's going on inside. He's honest and transparent. And he tells God what he's feeling.

Job even shouts at God. And do you know what's so interesting about that? God doesn't get angry! He actually invites it. It's like God is saying,

You know I can handle your anger right? You know I can handle your raw emotions. I just want you to be honest about them and bring them to me.

You know what? I think God really has a sense of humour. Because this week as I was preparing this message something happened. A painful situation with someone close to me that cost me a night's sleep.

- And I could feel my instinct to deny the pain. *Just get over it Jeremy, you have a sermon to work on this week.*
- I could feel my instinct to minimize the pain. *It's not that bad, I've dealt with worse. I'll be okay.*

But maybe it was the Holy Spirit. Maybe it was the fact that I'm preaching on paying attention. That I took out my journal and wrote out before God what I was feeling.

God, I'm not sure what just happened. But right now I feel disappointed, betrayed, confused, discouraged, used, heartbroken...

And the words kept coming, and possibly some tears did too. And as I wrote them all down, I was wondering the whole time, *How can a guy feel so many emotions?*

What's going to happen with this situation? I don't know. But what I do know is that God is with me. He's with me in my pain and he's with me in my loss.

The first step in the grieving process is to pay attention.

The second step is to **Live in the in-between**.

And this in-between place is a hard place to be in. Because it means wrestling with hard questions. Questions like:

- What's going on?
- Why is this happening?

- Does God even care?

There's a tension and mystery. Because we might not get the answers right away. We might not even get them on this side of heaven.

Look at Job. He knew he hadn't sinned and he didn't know why he was suffering. Did Job eventually get his answers from God? No, he didn't.

That's why living in the in-between is so hard. We want to know why. But we need to accept that we may never get all the answers.

And that's something Job's friends couldn't do. They couldn't accept the idea that Job was innocent. So what do they do? They say, *Job, the reason you're suffering is because you've sinned. You must not have prayed enough or loved God enough. Because if you had, God wouldn't be dealing with you in this way.*

Is any of that true? Of course not.

Have you ever had friends who tried to encourage you but made you feel ten times worse?

Job's friends did great at the beginning. They sat with him in silence for a whole week, just being with him.

But then, things take a turn for the worse. They misuse scripture to attack him. They spiritualize his situation. They reduce the complexity of living in a fallen world to a bunch of simplistic answers and spiritual clichés.

Many have said that the book of Job is a rebuke against religious people. God certainly has harsh words for these friends. This should be a reminder for us that when we're comforting others, it's okay to not have the answers. Often the best thing you can do is simply be present, to let them know you're sorry for their loss and that you're there for them.

And what do you do when you're the one suffering? Sometimes the best thing you can do, sometimes the only thing you can do - is to wait on God.

Waiting is a major theme in the Old Testament. Abraham did it, Moses did it, Job did it. But for us, waiting seems so unproductive. Like waiting in line to get into the store. You just stand there and do nothing.

But the Hebrew word for waiting literally means "to bind together." To wait on God doesn't mean you do nothing. It means you draw close to him, you lean into him, you pray to him.

Eugene Peterson says,

Every time we persist in rejecting quick fixes, we deepen our availability and openness to God.

And the prophet Isaiah says that something amazing happens for those who wait.

those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31, *NRSV*)

Because as you pay attention to your emotions and you live in the confusing in-between time something happens. God renews your strength. He does something new.

This brings us to the third stage, **Let the old birth the new**. But you can't skip steps. You can't get to stage three if you haven't done the hard work of stages one and two.

Pete Scazzero says that good grieving isn't just letting go of the loss. It's letting the loss bless you back.

At the end of the story, God restores Job. He gives him more wealth and more kids. Was it the same as the old? Was it better? We don't know. But what we do now is that Job's character has changed.

God calls Job his servant four times. It's a way of affirming his faithfulness. Job also prays for his friends. The same friends who attacked him when he was down. How can he do this? He can do this because he's grown in compassion.

Author Henri Nouwen says that the degree to which you grieve is the degree to which you are compassionate. When you hold on to God and learn to grieve well, he will make you more compassionate.

After all, how can you enter someone else's pain, if you haven't entered your own?

In 2013, Debbie lost her husband of 27 years to cancer. She struggled with her grief and with trying to find her purpose.

A few years later, I came across a Grief Share program at another church. I encouraged her and some others to attend. It had such a profound impact on her that we discussed the possibility of starting up a Grief Share group at Cornerstone.

We've run Grief Share at Cornerstone now for four years under Debbie's leadership. Even after the program ends for the year, Debbie continues to stay in touch with the participants. She meets up with them one-on-one and hosts regular get togethers at her home. She's convinced that God has given her a story to share.

Even as I talked with her last week, she shared about how learning to grieve well gave her a new sense of purpose and identity. It restored her faith and gave her compassion for others. And now many people in this church and in the community have been blessed because of her story and her compassion.

You're actually going to hear more from her in a couple weeks, because Debbie will be one of the ones getting baptized in our baptism service. You won't want to miss it!

You see, the message of Christianity is that death doesn't have the final word. Because life comes out of death. Jesus said,

...unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (John 12:24)

Jesus came into the world and experienced loss, loneliness, rejection, abandonment, betrayal and ultimately death on the cross. God the Father, also experienced loss. The loss of his son.

But the message of the cross is that death doesn't have the final word. Life comes out of death.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

As you pay attention and live in the in-between, the old will birth the new.

As you die and surrender to God, your life will come back, in resurrected form. Your faith will be renewed, your identity will become more clear. You'll be more resilient and more compassionate because you've learned to grieve well.

We've heard from many of you how much this series has resonated so strongly. So many of you are hurting and confused. You're looking for a way to go deeper and experience the healing you're longing for.

So what will you do when this series ends?

Last year, we introduced a powerful new program called Freedom Session.

Freedom Session is a 28-week healing discipleship journey that uncovers the roots of our pain and invites Jesus to heal those areas.

In our very first year, over 50 people signed-up! In fact, last month, we had the joy of holding an online graduation ceremony. We heard story after story of personal transformation and deep healing of emotional and relational wounds.

This was such a huge success that we're running Freedom Session again. It's going to start in October but the registration deadline is September 20. You can learn more, sign-up and even watch that powerful graduation ceremony on our webpage (cornerstonechurch.ca/freedomsession) so please check that out.

I hope you've been encouraged today and that you'll check out Freedom Session if that's for you.

Grieving your wounds and losses is part of your discipleship. Because God will use that to enlarge your soul. Paul says that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

So be blessed church. Be blessed so that you can live more and more into that freedom. And so that you can be a blessing to others.