

Face-to-Face

Good evening and thank you to Pastor Bill and the leadership of Blessings for inviting Diane and myself to participate in this special evening for recognizing our grief, particularly as it challenges us in the Christmas holiday season. For a number of years now we have been gathering together to share understanding and encouragement as we face the reality of our losses and the accompanying pain, and also to find comfort in the recognition that we are not alone. We walk this road with each other and we walk this road with our God. In many ways the Christmas season seems like the annual climax of our awareness and sensitivity to our own grief and the grief of others. Perhaps this is because Christmas time is traditionally a family time and it becomes glaringly obvious when we bring the family group together that a loved one is missing. Maybe it is because the New Year rolls right in behind it and that triggers us to count our own days and the anniversaries of our missing and mourning. Certainly, it doesn't help that the days seem shorter and duller and the nights are longer and it all feeds into feelings of melancholy and yearning when we are in grief. For one who is experiencing a recent loss, the Christmas season may be the perfect storm. And so, we gather.

One of the most helpful things that can be offered to someone in grief is understanding. That understanding can come in two ways. First of all, it may come by our personal growth in understanding our own grief. Why do I feel this way? Is feeling this helpful or hurtful to me? Am I alone in this? Is what I'm feeling normal or natural? How do I deal with these feelings in this situation? Where is this heading? Will it end? If so, when and how? Our grief in the face of our loss knocks us so off kilter and there is so much to be done to reorient and to gain a solid footing again. It is hard work and tiring. Taking the opportunity to learn about our grief and how it is shaping and helping us to know God and ourselves better, and to bring us along a healing pathway, is vital to moving from resistance to reconciliation, from turning away to trying, from leaving to learning. Seeing our grief, not as a symptom of our loss, but as a helpful response to it opens up a new way to a new experience and a new hope.

The second way understanding comes to someone in grief is from being understood by others. Grief needs a companion. Grief, like love, cannot stand on

its own. Having the ear of one who is not only patient to listen and learn, but who also grows alongside in understanding your grief, is of great advantage to us as grievers. Our own inbuilt resistance to our grief is a normal challenge that eventually needs to be overcome. Having a coach in your corner urging you to up your game and defeat and vanquish your grief only exacerbates and holds up a difficult but important journey. However, having someone to lean on, someone to stop and sit with, someone to provide an encouragement for the day, or to share in the experience of loss as it takes many shapes and forms, is a God-send. Grief is a journey not to be travelled alone. It is meant to be both experienced and shared. Shared with God and shared in community.

Tonight, I hope to offer you a little of both. Some opportunity for growth in your personal understanding of your grief as well as an understanding partnership alongside your grief. I believe it is helpful for us to not only recognize the cause of our grief, that is the event or situation that prompted our grieving, it is also important to recognize what in particular we are grieving over. This of course can vary as we move from experience to experience and as we discover we miss our loved one and their place in our lives in multiple ways. There are many facets to this, but for tonight I would like to focus on missing our loved one's presence. Missing seeing them face-to-face.

During the pandemic we have all had a small taste of this. When we were at the peak times of restriction or quarantine, we had to limit ourselves to a small bubble or group of people. That meant for the rest of our relationships we were restricted to texting, or phoning and not meeting in person. Quickly we became adept at video chatting to create the nearest facsimile to meeting in person. It was better than not seeing each other at all, but it did not quite measure up to sitting together face to face. What a relief when our bubble could expand to larger groups meeting in person. The harsh reality with the death of a loved is that face to face meeting comes to an abrupt end. We can draw it out a little to allow for our goodbyes and for coming to grips with the reality, and even then, we feel the one-sidedness of it as we look at our loved ones in the casket. We see them but they do not see us. That reality is jarring, yet is some way also helpful for easing us into this new reality. It would be impossible to say goodbye to our loved ones and bury their bodies if they would respond to us from their casket. We need to confirm that our face-to-face relationship has ended. And we grieve

it. If we could now from time to time video chat to see each other again how much would we not appreciate that second best opportunity?

There is a poignant story captured in the Bible depicting this reality in the book of Acts. Paul the apostle is working his way through Asia Minor, spreading the gospel and establishing churches. As he enters the home stretch of his journey the Spirit is urging him on to Jerusalem where he knows he will face fierce opposition and possibly death. On the way he checks in on some of the churches he established on his first time around and offers them words of encouragement. In this particular passage he turns to the elders of Ephesus to remind them of what he has preached to them and to beware of false teachers. He lets them know that he considers this will be his final opportunity to see them because of what he may face ahead. The encounter in Acts 20 ends with these verses:

³⁶ When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

What grieved them most was that they would never see his face again.... We don't need to be Paul or the elders of Ephesus to understand what the text is relaying. One of the greatest burdens of our loss is the essence of this reality. No more face-to-face meeting. And what does this mean? It does not mean that they won't remember what Paul said or did. It doesn't mean that they will lose their memory of him or the copies of the letters he had written. It means they will lose the personal connection and the knowing and sharing that come with that. The intimacy of it. The deeper connection that is associated with it.

When a young child looks into their Mom's or Dad's eyes with their chubby little hands firmly holding their cheeks, or when a boyfriend asks his girlfriend to look into his eyes to express the depth of his love, or even when two people sit across from each other in deep conversation, we observe a deeper level of closeness, a richer sense of understanding. And then really *seeing* someone, really having face to face intimacy means *knowing* each other, appreciating each other, delving into a greater depth of sharing and connectedness. It is not only about being in the same space but being truly aware of each other. Seeing each other face-to-face.

And this is a significant part of our missing and grieving. Knowing that we cannot gain that connection back on this side of eternity. And we search for it and yearn for it. It is not coincidental that we may dream about our loved ones, or even see memory pictures of them in our minds in familiar places where they would be; their favourite chair, coming around the corner, walking through the door, or driving up the driveway. Photos are helpful in transition, but in time they may feel more like the paper they are printed on than the reality of the presence they represent. Everything eventually pales in the absence of seeing each other. This expectation and desire is hard to let go of and forms part of the core of our grief experience.

At Christmas time and during other times of family celebration this sense of loss can be heightened. A mother feeling the ache of not seeing her child's face, even though there may be other children to look at and cherish in the room. A husband, thankful for his children and grandchildren as they visit but mostly pining to see his wife. A child missing his Mom, even though many others are busy trying to mother him. This is a reality for the grieving and it is not intended to convey that they think less of others who are present or that they take them for granted. It is most helpful for them to have someone acknowledge that it is expected and okay that they will be missing the presence of one they loved. Time and space need to be carved out for our grieving even as we gather for the holiday festivities amongst our family and friends.

And yet the Christmas story introduces another element to this reality for the grieving believer. For Christmas is the time when we remember that God came down to us to help us by becoming one of us. He came to earth to be with his people face-to-face. He came to share in our grief and suffering and walk the road of Gethsemane and Calvary. What had happened to our spiritual parents, Adam and Eve, in losing face-to-face fellowship with God our Father because of their sin was being repaired by his Son who came as the second Adam to make all things new. It wasn't pretty...he came to us face-to-face and we despised him and did not want to look at him. We turned our backs on him. He was crucified for our sins and in our place. Like Peter, we turned away from his knowing and loving gaze in shame.

And yet God made it such that he bore that punishment for our sins so that we may one day see him again, that we may look at him face-to-face. The Bible

teaches us that when Christ returns, we will see him as he is. Job prophesied many years earlier that with his own eyes he would see his Redeemer. And his heart yearned for that day.

We do long to see our loved ones again face-to-face. A woman once told me that her children kept trying to encourage her by telling her that one day, when she died, or when Christ returned, she would see her husband again. She told me that, although she missed her husband dearly, she was not so sure she would have eyes for him. She would be looking for Jesus and he would captivate her. I think she was right. I think this may be one of the greatest lessons for us in our grief, as we let go of our loved ones. They are a gift and a treasure from God for our life and we miss them now dearly. But our greatest hope is that we would share the experience of meeting Christ with them. Christ will be our all in all. And as our gaze meets his on that great day, we will not only see him, but we will for the first time in our lives feel truly seen, truly known, truly safe, perfectly loved, completely understood. Then we will experience the miracle of Christmas to the fullest. To see our loving Saviour face-to-face!

And yet here we are, entering another Christmas season, sharing old griefs and fresh ones, walking the well-worn pathways of our lives with the people God has given to accompany us, also as we shoulder the burden of our griefs. In a little while we'll have an opportunity to light a candle in remembrance of those we're missing. Perhaps we'll even be able to bring a fresh picture of their face into our minds' eyes and experience some joy or peace in that. And Christmas will come with the New Year in tow and we'll continue to yearn for something better. The hope of each Christmas and turning of the calendar is the knowledge that we are moving forward and closer to day of our Lord's return. Our hope is not in recapturing what we have lost, but in gaining something far greater and sharing it with those who have gone before us. In our grief today, we ask God again to give us patience and an understanding friend to walk alongside us. In our grief we ask the Spirit, and our friends, for assurances of what Christ has in store for us. We can't do it alone and we don't have to. God has made provisions for us for this journey. Also for this Christmas season.

There is a popular hymn that captures something of this expectation of our Saviour:

*He shall return in robes of white
The blazing sun shall pierce the night
And I will rise among the saints
My gaze transfixed on Jesus' face*

*O praise the Name of the Lord our God
O praise His Name forevermore
For endless days we will sing Your praise
Oh Lord, oh Lord our God*

May this God give you the peace of the Christmas season and great hope for the New Year, even as you miss the ones you loved.