

## What Can I Say?

Text: Romans 12:15, John 11:35

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 20, 2021*

When I was in college, the mother of a friend of mine died suddenly. As I gathered with a few others in his room, I had no idea what to say. At that point in my life, the only people I was remotely close to who had died were great grandparents. One of my grandfathers had died, but I was only two. I had no real experience of loss, and I sat in that room feeling very uncomfortable.

I was especially uncomfortable when things fell silent. I felt like everyone was so unhappy and I thought there must be a silver lining somewhere that could lighten the mood. And so I said what is, to date, probably the worst and most inappropriate thing I've ever said to anyone: "At least you won't have to worry about a Mother's Day card!" Even now, more than 40 years later, I want to crawl under a rock when I remember that moment. It was wrong on so many levels. And it happened because I had no idea what to say and was unable to just sit in silence. I wanted to help. I wanted to make things better. But I did just the opposite.

Last week we talked about the book of Job and God's condemnation of Job's friends slinging bad theology around, telling Job he must somehow be at fault for the enormous losses he was suffering and even accusing him of lying when he claimed he hadn't done anything. What we didn't talk about last week was the fact that, at the beginning of Job's misfortune, his friends came and did exactly the right thing. They just came and sat with him in silence, providing a calm and loving presence that let Job know he was not alone.

But in time, the silence became too uncomfortable for Job's friends. They became impatient with his misery and wanted to lift the cloud and get things back to normal. And as they began to speak, just like with me, they said exactly the wrong things. And so here on Father's Day, when a father and mother in this congregation have now lost the second of their two children to tragedy, I want to use this time to talk through what is and is not helpful to those who are suffering so that you can avoid mistakes like mine and those made by Job's friends.

On the one hand, there is no cookie cutter response to loss. Every situation is unique; we have unique relationships with those who are in distress; and we each have our own unique strengths, weaknesses, and experiences that we bring. But there are some general principles that we can apply, so that's where I want to focus.

The single verse from Paul in Romans 12:15 is a solid guide for how to be with people both in good times and in bad. "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Forgetting this is what got me into trouble. I wanted to pull my friend out of the terrible grief he was experiencing. I cared about him, but it's also true that his grief was making me uncomfortable. When I couldn't keep my own discomfort at bay and weep with someone who was weeping, I should have just said, "I can't stay, but I wanted you to know how sorry I am for your loss." If I had just shown up and left when my discomfort began to surface, I would have shown that I cared, and I wouldn't have ended up adding to his hurt.

Ironically, Christians can be especially prone to ignoring Paul's advice to weep with those who weep. The church where I grew up was filled to the brim with compassionate, loving people. But at the time of a death, there was a strong sense that grief was not really appropriate. The one who had

died had gone to glory and we should put self-pity aside and celebrate their resurrection day. Those folks would do anything and everything to help with the practical needs of those who experienced the death of a loved one, but any tears were met with some version of “Victory in Jesus.”

On the one hand, that is the Christian promise. It’s not that what they proclaimed in such moments was false. But it also disregarded the very real pain of loss. When we take time to weep with those who weep, we are helping people enter the grieving process, which is normal, healthy, and necessary. Being taught to stuff my grief away, was harmful to both my physical and emotional health for over a decade.

If you want further proof that weeping with those who weep is sage advice, I’ll point you to what is the shortest verse of the Bible, at least if you’re reading in the King James version. John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” The context of that verse makes weeping a puzzling thing for Jesus to do. As we read through the Gospels, we learn that Jesus has not only his 12 disciples around him, but friends—people who put him up for the night; people that he hangs out with when he’s not feeding 5,000 people on a hillside somewhere. Once you leave the inner circle of the twelve, it appears that his three best friends are three siblings who live together in the town of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Those three are so close to Jesus that when Lazarus gets seriously ill, they send a runner to go find Jesus. I mean, when one of your best friends is performing miraculous healings all over the place, you can count on him to show up for you, right? Well, Jesus gets the message but doesn’t come. By the time he shows up, Lazarus has been dead for four days and his sisters are livid. Mary wouldn’t even show up to see Jesus when he arrives and Martha lets him have it, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died!” When Mary finally gets pulled out of the house to greet Jesus, she says the same thing. Jesus then asks to go to the tomb.

But here’s the thing. John’s gospel implies that Jesus knows what he’s going to do and that in fact he delayed coming for exactly that reason. He has come to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead. I mean, if it were me, I’d be saying, “I know, I know, I’m late but follow me...come on, pull out your phones...Wait til you see this!” But the Bible tells us that when Jesus sees Mary and Martha and the others who have gathered all weeping, he was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” And then he weeps right along with them. He’s going to raise Lazarus from the dead, literally within the next ten minutes, and he’s standing there crying with the mourners. Why?

I think he’s crying because that’s what love does. We weep with those who weep, even if we have insider information, even if we think there’s no real reason for someone to be upset or that there are better days around the corner. Grief is to be honored. Back on Mother’s Day I talked about what it means to honor—it’s to give weight to something, to treat a concern seriously. Jesus here shows us how to honor grief. Despite knowing he’s about to perform his greatest miracle to date, Jesus honors the grief of his friends. He weeps both for them and with them.

That is the number one principle of being present with anyone, no matter what they’re feeling. What someone feels is what they feel, whether it’s joy, grief, anger, or whatever. You can help keep people from acting on those feelings in destructive ways—weeping with those who weep doesn’t mean ignoring a suicide attempt. It just means that you recognize that this moment is about them, not you, and you do all you can to understand how they’re feeling and share the load.

You don't need to have answers; it's not a time to teach or preach. Bite your tongue if you feel like saying "God needed another angel in heaven," or "Everything happens for a reason," or some other platitude. Sitting in silence and holding a hand is perfectly acceptable. If you're very close to the person, that might be for a long time, or it might be just a small, quick gesture at the door or when going through a receiving line at a funeral. If you show up, you have conveyed your sympathy and a silent gesture of concern will never get you into trouble.

If that feels awkward or if showing up in person is going to be difficult for you, you can send a card. Obviously if you make a phone call, silence is going to be creepy so you do need to say something on the phone. But if you're nervous about it, remember that you are just registering that you care. "I just heard and wanted to call just to say I care and that I'm praying for you." If you feel like you can go further, you could offer, "Can I pray for anything specific?"

All of what I've talked about so far is designed to help keep you from doing harm while sending the message that you care. But there are other ways to be helpful if you're able. Some people find it difficult to sit still for anything; and if that's you, there are frequently things that someone in a crisis can use help with. The most basic of these is food—sometimes that might be groceries, but more often it's a prepared meal or something that can be offered to other visitors who come to the door. Often a church will coordinate meal delivery to make sure there aren't 10 meals in one day and then nothing for a week, but dropping by with some fruit, a meal, or some baked goods is always welcome.

And if you really want to be helpful with food, spread it out. While there is a moment of crisis—when you first learn what has happened—the impact of that crisis can go on for a very long time. Those of us who want to respond, tend to do so in the first few days, flooding our friends with attention and care. And then it all disappears just as quickly, just as they're beginning to really feel the depth of their loss. When my father died, we had food literally rotting on our countertops. The fridge was packed, the freezer was packed, and we couldn't eat everything fast enough to keep the food from spoiling. It was appreciated in the moment, but it would have been much better if some of those folks had stopped by two or three weeks later as we sat alone with our loss.

And food is not the only thing. The situation varies according to the crisis, but there may be a need for someone to walk the dog, take the kids for a day, mow the lawn or help put all that food into the fridge or freezer. Some people need help with the maze of paperwork for insurance claims, taxes, or death certificates and social security. Others might need a ride, help finding a place to live, or help making phone calls. Some might just need another person in the house for a few hours or even a night or two to ease their fears or to make the house seem less empty.

Just a general, "Do you need anything?" isn't likely to produce an answer and a lot of people are reluctant to impose on others. But if you know a person well enough, you can call or show up and make a specific suggestion. "I'm taking my kids to the park, do your kids want to come along?" "I'm free this morning and feel like mowing a lawn. Can I come do yours?" "I made a big pot of soup. Can I bring you some? Or would next week be better?" But if a person is adamant about not needing help, don't push it. While some are overwhelmed and are grateful for help, others value the distraction that daily tasks provide. If you make an offer, try to be specific. If it's refused, respect that. Remember it's about what they need, not what you think they need or what you would want in their place.

My final tip is perhaps the thing with the greatest potential for healing over time. You can help facilitate the sharing of stories. Stories are the building blocks of human relationships and in many ways the stories we tell about ourselves and our circumstances shape our reality. A key stumbling block to healing after a tragedy is the inability to talk about it or sometimes even to acknowledge it. The community rituals around crises—whether they are in a religious setting or not—are a way to help people find a story that can bring comfort, hope, and a sense that we are not alone.

We can do that as individuals also. All you need to begin are two words said in a warm, caring voice: “What happened?” Then be quiet and let the other person decide whether they are able and willing to tell you. It doesn’t matter if you already know. Let them tell it, if they can. But also honor their right not to speak if they aren’t ready. “I just can’t talk about it yet,” or “I’m still processing,” or whatever they say in response can be followed with, “I understand. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. I’m here if you ever want to talk about it.”

While it should never become all about us, there are times when sharing our own stories is appropriate. Many times at the wakes or visiting hours for those I’ve lost, people came with their own memories of my father or mother or dear friends—often stories I had never heard, sometimes from before I was born. Those stories helped me understand the full picture of the people I had lost, adding new dimensions to them and bringing new understanding of what made them who they were. Sometimes others told me their own experiences of what it was like when they went through a similar loss and what they did to cope. The sharing of stories is a time of community wisdom, sometimes the balm of laughter, and helping each other through.

And if you do say something inappropriate, there’s at least one man, who is now about 60 years old somewhere, who can tell the story of this girl in college who said the most inappropriate thing imaginable when his mother died, but he let it go because, well, at least she came, and it’s hard to know what to say, you know? Amen.