

17 May 2015

Sister Death: Comforting Well
Romans 12:9-18

Romans 12:9-18. *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

When I was eighteen, just finishing my first semester of college in Oklahoma, my sister died in an accident. She was thirteen, bright and full of promise, but that made no difference: she still died. I flew back to Singapore for the funeral and stayed through Christmas with my parents. Over those next weeks I had my first experience with Christian comfort for the grieving, much of which was . . . not so comforting. A lot of people said, “Well, at least Marilyn was a Christian,” by which they meant “got to go to heaven.” Not as comforting as you might think; I still missed her. Then, of course, there were the ones who trotted out, “God wanted another little angel in heaven.” Even in my teens, I didn’t understand that one. Why would my parents and I take comfort in being told that our God was a selfish SOB who thought nothing of tearing our hearts out so as to fill out the alto section in his angelic choir? But the real classic came in a letter to my mother, from another missionary lady, who suggested that God had taken Marilyn so young because he knew that when she got older she would fall into grievous sin. That’s some pretty high-test comforting going on there, huh? It must have been good since even today, 34 years later, I still remember that comfort so clearly. And with so much anger.

There are few times in a person’s life when she is as receptive to the kind of love that we as Christians are capable of giving as during a time of grief. We are people of life, not just of life but of abundant life that does not end. We are people who, in theory at least, represent hope even in the valley of deathshadow. And sometimes we do. Often, though, here’s what we do instead.

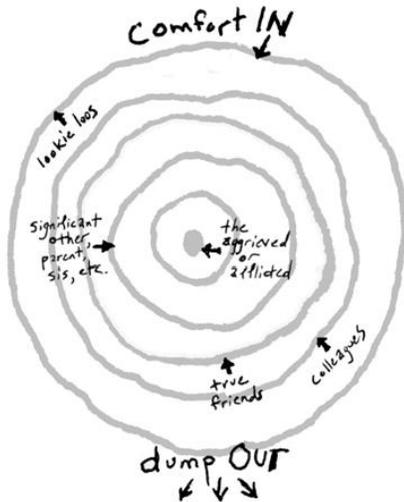
We offer explanations. God wanted another angel . . . it was just his time . . . the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away . . . it was God’s will. Don’t do this. Explanations don’t help.

We offer advice. You need to just let it out; go ahead and cry . . . crying doesn’t help; you need to just go on with your life . . . you need to stay busy . . . you should take some time off.

We offer ghoulish and revolting reasons to cheer up. At least you have other children . . . you’re still young; you’ll meet somebody new . . . at least he didn’t commit suicide; my cousin’s son did that . . . please, please, please don’t do this. “It could be worse” is never comforting.

I could go on. So could you. Just google “Things Not To Say to the Grieving,” and you’ll find multiple lists of Don’ts. But it’s not that easy, not as simple as just having a list of what not to say. I read through those lists that google pointed me toward, and some of them listed things not to say that others recommended. More puzzling, even some of the things I mentioned above – the worst of the worst – you will sometimes hear grieving people saying to themselves – and apparently finding comfort in it. In fact, genuine comfort has less to do with what is said than who is saying it to whom. Let me give you a way to think about it that I’ve found very helpful, from clinical psychologist Susan Silk. There’s a description on your bulletin insert, along with a diagram, but let me summarize it. In every grief, there are people who are at the center of the storm, and people who are a little more distant. When you are talking to someone who is closer to the grief than you are, be quiet and listen. Do not offer explanations or advice, and above all, do not talk about your own feelings.

You are there to hold their grief gently, and that's all. When you need to talk about your own grief, go find someone who is farther away from the center than you are. As Silk puts it, "Comfort IN; dump OUT."



Think about the funeral visitation line, that time when everyone queues up to each say a word to the bereaved. So many times I hear grieving spouses standing in those gauntlets who have suddenly found themselves in the position of trying to comfort others, as neighbors and acquaintances pour out their own feelings on the person whose life has just been changed forever. Please don't do that. Don't pile your grief on top of the person who already has too much to bear. Again, the person at the center of the storm can say anything to anyone. If you are not that person, then remember: care first for the one at the center, and seek your own comfort somewhere else.

Another way to say this is to say that comfort is founded on relationships. And that's where we as Christians should be different. Jesus said that we are to be known by how we love each other, and Jesus always described love in terms of putting the other's welfare first. So does Paul in Romans 12, in the passage you just heard. Now this passage is not specifically about comforting the grieving, although v. 15 – *rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep* – is probably the best suggestion you'll hear today. But in this chapter Paul establishes the framework for how we as a community of faith should relate to each other, not just in times of trial but at all times. We are to think first of the needs of others. Verse 9: *let love be genuine*. Verse 10: *love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor*. Paul tells us to remove ourselves from the center of attention. In today's language, it's not about you, so don't get your feelings hurt. Verse 16: *live in harmony with one another*. Verse 17: *do not repay anyone evil for evil*. There is, Paul says, a bigger picture here. Verse 17 again: *take thought for what is noble in the sight of all*. Verse 18: *if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*. It's sort of a random list of commands here, but there is an underlying theme. As the community of Christ, we are not just separate individuals who occasionally do stuff together. We are part of one body, and responsible for each other's well being. When one of us is weak or wounded, we join hands and together hold that one up. What does this mean for comforting the grieving? Listen when they choose to speak; be still with them when they choose to be quiet; talk about the Packers' and free agency, if that's what gives them relief; cry with them when they cry. Whatever you do, let it begin with their need, not yours. Then you will be holding their grief gently.

I need to say one more thing as I conclude this series on Life and Death for people of the resurrection. As I just said, Christian comfort of the grieving should be defined by gentleness and selflessness; it is NOT defined just by promises of heaven. Yes, we *do* teach that there is life beyond this one. As I have said throughout this series, we believe that death is temporary, but love is eternal. There is a heaven, whatever it is like, but what that is, we don't know. While the Bible does talk about heaven, what little it says is obscure and contradictory and sometimes just puzzling. Golden streets? What's that about? Who cares about gold in heaven anyway? And – hear this – there is nothing, anywhere, in scripture that supports the popular conception of heaven as a place of endless delight and continual pleasure, where all we do all day is amuse ourselves. That doesn't even make sense. Why would the God who can't stand selfishness in this life create a heaven that's a resort village of eternal self-indulgence? No, when we strip away all the metaphors – pearly gates, gardens, golden streets – what we are left with is that whatever eternal life is like, it will be about loving others wholly and generously.

So when you comfort those who grieve, don't promise them heaven, show them what it's like. Love them.