

Miserable Comforters: What A Grieving Person Probably Doesn't Need

“Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand[1. C.S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, 12].” [C.S. Lewis, after his wife died]

One of many great things about being Josh Crowe’s roommate for a year was that he taught me about music. We bonded over dozens of songs, over countless stories and moments. I can’t hear “Brick” by Ben Folds Five without thinking of Josh and smiling. The look on his face as he told me what the lyrics meant is forever etched into my brain. Thanks to Josh I get how music is the language of the soul.

But there is one song we talked about that means more than the others: a heart-wrenching personal testimony by Caedmon’s Call called “Center Aisle”. The story behind the song, written by Derek Webb, is as honest as it is tragic. It involves the death of his best friend’s teenage sister and how he struggled to write a song for the funeral. “Center Aisle” is the song that he really wanted to write but couldn’t because it would not be appropriate for the service. It is far too dark and raw. So he started writing it on the car ride home. You can read a brief account of Webb’s testimony and hear the song [here](#).

“Center Aisle” echoes several things I have learned over the last 20 years of being a pastor about dealing with grief. While no two people are the same and people indeed grieve

differently, there are things about dealing with it that come up often when I talk with those in the depths of it. As with Job calling his friends “miserable comforters” I have discovered that often people’s well-meaning intentions towards the grieving can make it worse. This is an attempt to reflect on what God has taught me from the Bible and from hundreds of conversations that I hope will help us all to minister to grieving people in a more emotionally intelligent way.

Here are a few things a grieving person (probably) does not need:

1. Answers

Tragedy, loss, and mourning should make us comfortable saying, “I don’t know.” These three words are at times okay in Christianity and even at times the only legitimate response. And sometimes knowing why doesn’t help at all. If you read Lamentations, Jeremiah absolutely knows why Jerusalem is being judged and it didn’t alleviate his pain.

Job’s friends treated Job’s grief like a problem to be solved. Bildad in chapter 8 even has the gall to tell Job that his children died because they were sinners. Pain isn’t a math problem. It is in many ways as different from math as possible in that it lacks order and logic. It’s messy. It brings dissonance. It makes us incoherent. Solutions to pain are often like square pegs to a round hole.

2. Cliches

Pain cuts through the most superficial parts of our faith, in particular how we speak. Grief has a way of making platitudes seem perverse and disgusting. If you have ever read *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis, you will find the exact opposite of “strong faith” cliches. You’ll find intense monologues of anger and vicious, struggling doubt—closer to what Job says in chapters 3, 6, 7 and 30, what dozens of Psalms say and what

many others in the Bible wrote.

Once on Facebook I asked people what the worse Christian cliches were and the top two both dealt with grief: "God won't give you more than you can handle" and "God (or Heaven) just needed another angel" (when someone dies). Quite often words like these grate on the grieving person's ears.

3. Argument or Correction

Job's friends actually offered this, as vulgar as it may be. Yet I will guess it is rare in our culture for someone to argue with a grieving person. At least with those who are grieving in ways we commonly think.

So here I will state that I think a possible application for many of us may be the need to *not* debate with people who are grieving in a different sense, due to issues like racial injustice or hostility from the church for their sexual struggles.

On the first one I will not repeat verbatim what I wrote for in the NFL on REO article last week but will allude to the fact that while some racial issues are worthy of discussion and disagreement, some people are hurting and just need to be listened to without judgment or debate.

On the second, it is clear to me that some people are struggling with same-sex attraction and Christians are frequently guilty of preaching from a distance without showing any semblance of compassion, humility or relational engagement. And this rejection in turn creates genuine grief people carry with them constantly. Dr. Michael Oliver, Department Chair of Psychology at Welch College says (while in part quoting Eric L. Johnson), "Through our abrasive speech toward homosexuality, 'we have assigned it to a dark corner where it cannot shine'...We should call God's people to listen

to brothers and sisters who struggle with SSA[2. Michael Oliver, *Sexuality, Gender and the Church*, 136].” After a person is wounded, it may be time to put down the sword.

4. Theology Without Biblical or Relational Context

Romans 8:28 is a great verse about God working things together for good. But unless a person understands what “good” means in the Bible and unless they properly understand the verses before this passage that talk about longing to be rid of our bodies of sin and suffering and groaning in our prayers because we don’t know how to pray, that verse may not help much. And even with a proper biblical understanding, it may not be what the person needs to hear just a few hours or a couple of days after the tragedy.

In general, unless I know a person quite well I prefer to stay away from trying to Jesus juke their suffering. There are of course exceptions and that is why I use “probably” in my title. If I am close to a person I will know better how to use the Bible to serve them.

I recall a classmate of mine in grad school who lost his teenage daughter unexpectedly. After taking time off to grieve he came back and told the class, “People that didn’t know me wanted to quote the Bible to me. I know the Bible. That’s not what I needed.” That will not be everyone’s response but there is an element of truth in it for a lot of grieving people.

Conversely, a grieving person probably *does* need:

1. Presence

The heart of the issue with all of the above points is that they involve talking without empathizing. Time and time again I have heard people in the deepest levels of hurt tell me they

didn't want an abundance of words, but rather just for someone to be there and cry with them. In "Center Aisle," Derek Webb wrote this, reflecting on the awkwardness of trying to interact with his best friend at the funeral:

*There aren't words to say
Words aren't remembered
Presence is*

Back in January of 2014 when REO contributor David Lytle's first wife, Bethany, passed away, the guys from REO were talking privately and I mentioned this lyric. Later, when Dave joined the conversation he responded that he agreed with it.

A huge problem in Job isn't just that the friends argued and spoke falsely about God. It's that from Job 4 to 26, they take up nearly half of the conversation. Often, just being there speaks sufficiently.

2. Commitment

When you read Ruth, you find Ruth refusing to abandon Naomi even after her initial grief over losing her husband and sons. Ruth's declaration of commitment to Naomi is so powerful I've heard it read at weddings. I think quite often, after a while, the tragedy that causes a person grief leaves the public consciousness but the griever continues to have bad days and weeks, struggling with pain. And that is where long-term relational commitment is vital.

In an article Dave wrote about life as a widower, he said, "Most importantly, widows and widowers need relationship. This need is especially acute for [them], because this is exactly what has been stolen from them[3. David Lytle, *D6 Family Minsistry Journal*, Vol. 2, Randall House Academic]." Additionally, he told me that in the long run of grief, commitment from people enables them to see you in the daily

grind and offer you the words of true encouragement like “Hey, you are doing a great job parenting in these difficult circumstances.” That can be like water in the desert of grief.

3. Patience

Sometimes we need to resign ourselves to the fact that grief is just hard and we cannot do very much to alleviate it. I have heard grieving people say that they hate hearing “Sorry for your loss” over and over and getting the constant looks of pity. Those are reasonable reactions to a grieving person yet they still can be met with frustration.

Even after Ruth commits to Naomi, Naomi remains bitter. Commitment didn’t take the grief away. I will guess that there were some tough moments in their relationship, and Ruth had to sacrifice greatly by being patient with her mother-in-law. Job’s friends did exactly what Job needed for one week (Job 2:11-13) but then lost patience. If you hear a grieving person talk the way C.S. Lewis did in *A Grief Observed*, you may think they are a heretic. Be patient with them.

Of course, all people need to try to process grief in a healthy way and that means eventually getting back to some sense of normalcy, whatever that means in a person’s unique circumstances. But the person may need great patience in the meantime.

Paul told us to weep with those who weep. I will never ever try to romanticize grief but if there is one way God does use horrid circumstances for good, it’s that he builds intimacy through it, with Him and with each other. The people I’m closest to are the ones who have cried with me. My church in Chicago basically is my family as a result. And it’s largely because they have just been there during the nightmarish

circumstances I've been through, mourned alongside me and not thrown cliches at my suffering.

May we all have those types of people in our lives and be that type of person to others.