

GRIEF AND COMMUNITY:
THE INCARNATE CHRIST AT WORK THROUGH COMMUNITY
TO COMFORT AND HEAL THOSE WHO GRIEVE

By
The Rev. Debra May Cerra

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77rev.dr77@gmail.com or ddcerra@calvaryriverton.org

Chapter 1 – The Journey of Grief

Introduction

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

There are many opportunities for the bereaved to gather with others. Support groups for widows and widowers, for parents who have lost children, and for those who have been through divorce are available. There are age appropriate groups, gender sensitive groups and internet support groups. Each offers a unique twist to the grieving process while helping the bereaved deal with loss and find ways to acclimate to life without their loved one.

The question that presents itself is: What is the essential piece that a Christian community can offer to grieving people which is missing in other grief support groups? My project will show that Christ's presence is significant in the healing process. Christ restores us to wholeness and embraces us when we hurt. The covenant community of God's people help the grieving reclaim the promise of scripture where Jesus says: "I will never leave you or forsake you."¹

My Personal Story

Everyone has a personal story about grief. My journey with grief has impacted me professionally and personally. As a pastor, I felt the challenge and the impact of my grief. My mind said that I needed to be strong and stalwart. But my heart broke with each of my losses. There were times that I thought I was dealing with my grief and there were times that I tucked it safely away, ignoring the hole it left. I faced many days that were shrouded in

¹ Hebrews 13:5, NRSV.

darkness. Hindsight tells me that I did not do well in seeking healing and restoration; of finding peace and hope; of affirming God's grace and God's love.

I was afraid to claim my grief. I believed that pastors were to be an example of faith and I was crying, "Help my unbelief."² I was frightened that I would fall apart and not be able to bring the pieces back together. I feared that I was too broken to be fixed.

Grief caught me off guard when, in 1996, I moved from New Jersey to serve as associate pastor of a congregation in Ohio. Though I felt called to this church, I struggled for months with what I classified as "homesickness." I spent many tearful afternoons baffled by my inner turmoil. I was torn between loving the call to ministry and hating the loneliness of being without family. Eventually I moved back to New Jersey and my grief dissolved into the far reaches of my memory.

But grief returned. In 2001, my mother, a twenty-three year breast cancer survivor, succumbed to the disease. Year after year she had beaten the odds, enduring radiation and chemotherapy. When she finally breathed her last, I wasn't ready for her to die. I wanted more time with her. I wanted my Mom. Again I faced a roller coaster ride of emotions as I mourned my loss.

Two days before the one year anniversary of Mother's death, Dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. Fourteen months later, my father was dead. Our pain was raw; our hearts were broken.

Then in 2005 my spouse of thirty years filed for divorce. My grief exploded; the pain paralyzed me. I fell into a pit of despair and loneliness and I thought no one could understand what I was feeling or thinking. I had doubts about continuing in ministry. I had misgivings about God's love and God's grace. I found no peace and no hope.

² Mark 9:24.

Though I continued serving as pastor, my sermons were dark and my prayers seemed empty. I met with a therapist and a spiritual director yet something was missing. As I look back on my despair, I know that I was in the hands of God. My problem was that, at the time, I didn't know it.

Each chapter of my grief journey took me to a dark place. With each loss, I found myself wishing for what had been. I wanted to turn back the hands of time but I knew I could not. But getting to a better place in my emotional state of woe was not easy. I was a believer whose faith had been rocked by the punch of grief.

Support Groups

In my brokenness, I decided to begin a grief support group at the church where I served as pastor. Initially I was going to “teach” the group but after only twenty minutes into the first class I realized that I needed to be part of the group rather than the leader of the group.

When I joined with a company of people who had also experienced loss, I found solace. This community of grieving people supported me even as I supported them. Together we embraced our grief in a constructive way as we shared its burden. What made the difference for me is the faith we shared and so this group became for me like a “cloud of witnesses” to the risen Christ. My grief was not separate from my faith.

My experience testifies to the power of the Incarnate Christ realized in the gathered community of broken souls. As we laughed and cried, talked and listened, sat in silence and prayed, I and others embraced our grief. We moved from the darkness of our grief to a journey with the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ. We went from feeling hopeless to

sensing renewed hope; from seemingly broken hearts to an awareness of the promise of restored wholeness. Healing is a process – the redemptive power of the Risen Lord permeated our beings. This support group embraced both community and faith.

Many support groups are available to those who grieve. The Hospice model offers a concept of care for the dying that embraces palliative rather than curative treatment. Their focus is on quality of life rather than quantity of life. Hospice also provides a caring community for caregivers. During the dying process, family members are offered support staff to help care for their loved one. After the death, family members are encouraged to attend grief support groups or speak to one of the Hospice grief counselors. As the Hospice website notes:

Grief counseling helps mourners with normal grief reactions work through the tasks of grieving. Grief counseling can be provided by professionally trained people, or in self-help groups where bereaved people help other bereaved people. All of these services may be available in individual or group settings.³

Though much can be gained from this kind of support, Hospice lacks an overt connection with God which is found in a Christian community support setting. Their counsel gives no assurance that there is a Presence of any kind, and in my view, such a Presence is Christ who walks with us, bringing comfort and healing to those who hurt and are living with grief.

Another organization, GriefShare, focuses on helping a person face the challenges of grief. Using a video and discussion format, participants view a clip featuring a grief expert and then break into small groups to discuss the message. This organization offers daily email messages as well as books, CD's, and videos on grief and recovery topics.

³ A Guide to Grief, Bereavement, Mourning, and Grief, www.hospicenet.org, p.4.

Their premise is that “the foundation for healing is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”⁴ The website and brochures discuss the importance of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It does not address those who already know Christ but who are experiencing doubts because of their grief.

GriefShare’s website notes:

GriefShare is for people grieving the death of a loved one. Many other life situations bring deep grief, such as separation and divorce, a loved one who is dying, estrangement, loss of a loved one to a cult, loss of custody of a child through divorce and more. If you are struggling with a loss not due to a death, GriefShare is not designed to meet your grief needs for healing.⁵

GriefShare is narrow in its scope. It excludes many whose losses are not due to death but still need counsel about their grief. GriefShare assumes that it is necessary to categorize loss and addresses the impact of grief within that narrow scope.

There are many other support groups like Hospice and GriefShare available to those who have experienced a loss. Each one has a different approach to helping those who grieve. None seem to embrace the seeds of faith that have already been sowed but need to be cultivated and re-established after a significant loss. I seek to not only affirm the importance of grief work but to further that work through a Christo-centric understanding. This my theological vision for the project.

Faith and the Christian Community

We, as friends and family, Christians and Spiritual leaders, visit with those who mourn, council with persons who experience a loss, and impart words of comfort to people who are journeying with grief. But what is the plan after the funeral is over; after the divorce

⁴ www.griefshare.org/healing/foundation.

⁵ www.griefshare.org/about.

papers are signed; after the house sells; after the friend moves away? There is more that is needed. There is more that we can offer. My personal experiences have convinced me that those who have a faith in Christ but are reeling from a significant loss are best served in Christian community. Support groups which are based within a Christian community reinforce the Christian faith and the promises of Scripture.

As pastors and leaders of the Christian church, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to lead hurting people into God's grace-filled embrace. Using a small group setting that focuses on the need for community, the power of God's Word, the value of locating the loss appropriately on the journey of life, and the importance of claiming Christ in the situation, those that have experienced loss will begin to realize that they are not alone; that there are others who understand; that there are people who care; and most importantly, that God cares.

As stories are shared; as pain is expressed; as memories are remembered, the grieving will find a path that offers hope and peace; understanding and love. Within this small group setting, Christ is shared – in thought, word, and deed. This is the promise for “where two or three gather in the name of Christ, Christ is present.”⁶

Conclusion

The door to grief opens when a person experiences a significant loss. Grief can be a lonely journey filled with potholes of darkness and depression, hopelessness and fear. When people who have experienced a significant loss gather in a small group setting, this community becomes the balm that offers comfort and hope. There is a sense that others understand; there is a sharing that happens – verbally and silently.

⁶ Matthew 18:20, NRSV.

This community becomes the hands and feet of Christ to one another. In the sharing and in the listening, people are able to recognize and accept God's healing love. Through community, the Incarnate Christ imparts the fullness of His love which is able to balm the wounds of loss and bring healing to the grieving.

Christ's presence in the grieving process is beneficial to the bereaved. In Chapter Two, I will provide a framework for the journey of grief using three distinct topics: The Theology of Incarnation, Grief Theory, and Community Theory. Chapter Three will explain how my project confirms that the love of Christ expressed in a Christian community impacts the grieving process. Chapter Four will be my evaluation of the project. It will include Community Parameters, "COPE with Grief" course results, and the ongoing vision for this project.

Chapter 2 – The Framework of the Project

Introduction

When we embrace faith in Christ, we acknowledge God’s presence. The Scriptures become the window for seeing and knowing about God and God’s Son, Jesus Christ. This chapter gives insight into specific scripture passages that can and do impact lives – especially lives that have been wounded and broken. God’s Word brings hope and promise, healing and love. God’s love, found in the Incarnate Christ, binds the wounds of the bereaved and helps in the journey of restoration. This is the power of the Incarnation.

Part 1 – The Theology of Incarnation

The Incarnation of Christ defined

The Theology of Incarnation is central to the Christian faith. The Incarnation – the union of mortal and divine – focuses on the fullness of Christ as both human and God. Though many scholars, both past and present, have tried to define and defend the Theology of Incarnation, there continues to be an air of mystery surrounding it.

The Theology of Incarnation is the belief that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, takes on bodily form, becoming both God and human. Jesus Christ becomes flesh when He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.⁷ This is supported by the teaching found in the Gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”⁸ Through the Incarnation humankind experiences the presence of the living Christ.

⁷ The Apostles’ Creed, *The Book of Confessions*, PCUSA.

⁸ John 1:14, NRSV.

One of the earliest debates about the Incarnation of Christ occurred during the reign of Constantine. In C.E. 312, Constantine attributed his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ. After elevating Christianity to the favored religion of the empire, Constantine had concern over the controversy within the church about the nature of Christ. He convened a council in Nicaea in C.E. 325. A creed was drafted affirming the position of Alexander and Athanasius: “The divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father.” In C.E. 381 a second Council, the Council of Constantinople, affirmed, revised and lengthened the existing creed.⁹ It became known as the Nicene Creed.¹⁰ In part it reads:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.¹¹

About the Divinity of Christ Andrew Purves notes: “In the one person of Jesus Christ God and human being are inseparably united, as, according to Athanasius of Alexandria, ‘He was very God in the flesh, and He was true flesh in the Word.’”¹² Jesus Christ is not fully human with divine insight nor is He fully God in a human body. The two distinct natures of Christ, human and divine, are the fabric of the Incarnation.

When the Incarnate Christ breaks into history,¹³ a new light is shed on God. Jesus Christ, the ultimate expression of God’s love, gives a greater understanding to the depth of

⁹ Bill East, “Constantinople I, 381 C.E.: Apollinarianism; www.the-orb.net.

¹⁰ The Nicene Creed (history and explanation). *The Book of Confessions, PCUSA*, p. 2.

¹¹ The Nicene Creed, p. 3.

¹² Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. xx-xxi. Quoting Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 3.41, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2d series, vol. 4 (reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998).

¹³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, edited by Robert T. Walker, USA, Intervarsity Press, 2008, p. 8. Torrance, a great Protestant theologian, was heavily influenced by John Calvin and studied under Karl Barth. He writes: “Everything in Christianity centers on the Incarnation of the Son of God, an invasion of God among men and women in time...”

that love. Karl Barth explains, “God is love in Himself. Being loved by Him we can, as it were, look into his ‘heart.’”¹⁴ When we look into the “heart” of God, we see the very core of God's being - the unconditional love God has for each of us.

Relational Aspect of the Incarnation

God wants to be intimately connected to others. God's desire for relationships begins within the Godhead. Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, reads: “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.”¹⁵ (*italic emphasis added*) The certainty of relationship is found in the words which God speaks: “Let *us*,” “*our* image,” and “*our* likeness.” The “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26 may be undeveloped yet it depicts God's desire to be in community with others.

God also chooses to associate with humankind. This relationship begins in the Hebrew Scriptures: Adam and Eve walk with God, talk with God, and are punished by God.¹⁶ Noah receives direction from God and God enters into a covenant with Noah.¹⁷ God calls Abraham (Abram) to go to a new land, promising to make of him a great nation.¹⁸ God blesses Abraham with a son¹⁹ and through Isaac's lineage Abraham becomes the father of Israel.²⁰ God leads the Israelites through the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and in a

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, vol 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, part 2*, translators G. T. Thomson & Harold Knight; editors G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance; New York, T&T Clark International, 2004. p. 377 (Barth used non-inclusive language for God. I chose to leave the quote unaltered.)

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26, NRSV.

¹⁶ Genesis 3, NRSV.

¹⁷ Genesis 7-9, NRSV.

¹⁸ Genesis 12, NRSV.

¹⁹ Genesis 21, NRSV.

²⁰ Genesis 22:17-18, NRSV.

pillar of fire by night.²¹ God speaks to Moses and hands him the Ten Commandments as law for the Israelites.²²

Though God's relationships are centered in God's love for humankind love, God's people do not always reciprocate that love. Even while under the rule of judges and kings, women and men repeatedly sinned, defiled the land, and followed other gods. As God's spokesperson, the prophet Isaiah speaks of One who will reestablish a right relationship with God. Isaiah says:

Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.²³

Isaiah then defines the authority of Immanuel, "God-with-us":

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.²⁴

The prophets revealed God's plan for redemption and reconciliation. The gifts of salvation and transformation will come through the authority of Immanuel – "God-with-us."

In an act of unconditional love for God's children through the giving of God's Son – Jesus, the Christ – God offers grace and reconciliation and renews the bond between God and humankind. Thomas Torrance, affirming the stance of the Council of Nicaea with regards to the humanity and divinity of God, and supporting Karl Barth's belief in the power of the Incarnation²⁵ explains: "When we encounter God in Jesus Christ, the truth comes to us in its

²¹ Exodus 13:17-22, NRSV.

²² Exodus 20, NRSV.

²³ Isaiah 7:13-14, NRSV.

²⁴ Isaiah 9:6, 7a, NRSV.

²⁵ Karl Barth, p. 105. Barth writes. "Once and for all God became Man and so His Word reached the ears of us men, and so we men were reconciled to God." (non-inclusive language of God used by Barth)

own authority and self-sufficiency.”²⁶ In our relationship with the Incarnate Christ, God’s mystery – fullness which we cannot understand, God’s grace – compassion which we do not deserve, and God’s love – passion which we are unable to measure.

When Jesus Christ breaks into human history, humankind is called out of darkness into light,²⁷ out of the emptiness of death into life eternal,²⁸ and out of damnation into restoration.²⁹ Jesus brings salvation to the captive,³⁰ comfort to the troubled,³¹ and a way to the lost.³² Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”³³ Jesus Christ is God’s plan for reconciling the Creator and the created.

About God’s plan for the reconciliation of humankind, Kathryn Tanner writes:

God’s work begins with creation, continues in historical fellowship with a particular people, Israel, and ends with Jesus as the one through whom, in the Spirit, all people and the whole world will show forth God’s own triune goodness in unity with God.³⁴

Christ the Son reveals the love of God the Father and the power of God the Spirit to us.³⁵ Through Christ we are drawn back into the right relationship with God which existed before the power of sin moved into human life.³⁶ Charles Hendrick explains:

²⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, edited by Robert T. Walker, USA, Intersity Press, 2008, p. 1.

²⁷ 1 Peter 2:9, NRSV.

²⁸ Romans 6:23, NRSV.

²⁹ Acts 3:20-21, NRSV.

³⁰ Romans 13:11-12, NRSV.

³¹ 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, NRSV.

³² Luke 19:10, NRSV.

³³ John 14:6,7, NRSV.

³⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001, p 36.

³⁵ Kathryn Tanner, p. 37. Tanner’s theology supports this. She writes: “God’s whole effort to share God’s Trinitarian life with the world, with all its many distinct facets, is in this way focused in Christ.”

³⁶ Genesis 2:15-17, NRSV.

Jesus said many times that He came to save us, and in particular that He came to reconcile us to God. Christian theology understands Him as acting in effect as a bridge between God and humanity. By spiritual union with Jesus we are united with God. Through the union we are regenerated, becoming humans of the sort that God originally intended.³⁷

Through the Incarnation, the humanity and divinity of Christ, we have a God that understands our needs, forgives our sins, and draws us to God's Self.³⁸

Torrance notes that "the act of God the Son and God the Word are not two acts but one act, for revelation is part of reconciliation and reconciliation is part of revelation."³⁹

Torrance understands Christ to be both mediator and revealer. In the Incarnation, God's amazing grace and God's unconditional love intersect and humankind is reconciled to God.

Kathryn Tanner talks about this relationship:

Our lives are to be the reflection in action of our assumption into Christ, in virtue of their taking on the mode of Sonship. [This] becomes visible as our lives show forth, in action and in deed, the form of Christ's own life, the mode of Sonship. Thereby, the glory of God's own triune superabundance shines forth, not in a static epiphany, but from all that it is that we do for the good, from our efforts to instantiate and further the good of others.⁴⁰

This is the action of and reaction to God's amazing love – through God to us and through us to others. Through the relationships that God has with us and that we have with one another, we receive Christ's love; we embrace healing and wholeness. The Apostle Paul teaches: "In him [Christ] we live and move and have our being."⁴¹

The Incarnate Christ working through God's people:

³⁷ Charles Hendrick, "More About Christian Beliefs: The Incarnation," www.geneva.rutgers.edu, p. 1

³⁸ As Tanner references God.

³⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, p. 57.

⁴⁰ Tanner. P. 71.

⁴¹ Acts 17:28, NRSV.

United in Christ, the people of God are called to be God's ambassadors to the world. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."⁴² Jesus then explains that, though He must leave them, His Spirit will still remain: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth."⁴³ Jesus tells the disciples that they will not be orphaned.⁴⁴ Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Incarnate Christ opens the way for humankind to share God's love. James B. Torrance, as quoted by Andrew Purves, writes: "As Christ was anointed by the Spirit in our humanity to fulfill his ministry for us, so we are united by the same Spirit to share his ministry."⁴⁵ Humankind is empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work of Christ.

As God's own, we share God's love and hope, peace and joy as expressed in Christ. We become God's hands and feet, lips and heart for the world. Torrance explains:

What happens in the incarnation is the union of God and man. At last in the midst of our fallen humanity, within and in spite of our estrangement from him, God comes in love and binds us to himself forever. God and man meet in Jesus Christ and a new covenant is eternally established and fulfilled.⁴⁶

Torrance points out that it is the Incarnate Christ who bridges the gap between God's perfection and humankind's sinfulness.

The letter to the Romans promises: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"⁴⁷ When life sends catastrophic situations that throw us into a tailspin – when we

⁴² John 14:12, NRSV.

⁴³ John 14:16, 17a, NRSV.

⁴⁴ John 14:18, NRSV.

⁴⁵ James B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A. D. 381*. Ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 198). 145. Quoted in *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p xxiv.

⁴⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, p. 105-106. (Torrance used non-inclusive language for God and humankind. I chose to leave the quote unaltered.)

⁴⁷ Romans 8:31b, NRSV.

face the death of someone we love; when our significant other walks out on us, when we are the casualties of injustice or the victims of incest – we cry; we hurt; we retreat. We grieve. We feel removed from God’s grace and God’s mercy, and we think no hope is to be found. But that is not the case.

Tanner reminds us:

God, out of love and concern for us, would so humble Godself as to unite God with not just lowly humanity but humanity in the most dire straits – that is the sacrifice, made by God in Christ on our behalf, in death as over the course of Jesus’ whole life.⁴⁸

Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."⁴⁹

In spite of our frailty, our pain, our weakness, God’s grace is at work. Andrew Purves notes:

It is the grace of God in Christ for us that exposes the depth of the human condition in its separation from God in a way that science cannot. And this same grace offers a remedy that leads to healing, blessing, and salvation to eternal life in union with Christ.⁵⁰

It can be difficult to accept that God is present. It is even more difficult to claim God in the dark, lonely times. It is then that our words become those of the Psalmist and the Son: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁵¹ Even as we cry, we need to remember that grace abounds. We must claim the Good News which is the Word made flesh,⁵² the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ. Christ is “the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”⁵³ It is through Christ that we receive grace and mercy. It is through Christ that we are restored and made right with God. Through Christ, God’s amazing love is realized.

⁴⁸ Tanner, p. 29.

⁴⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV.

⁵⁰ Purves, p. xxix.

⁵¹ Psalm 22:1, Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, NRSV.

⁵² John 12:48, NRSV.

⁵³ John 1:5, NRSV.

Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”⁵⁴ Jesus produces a peace that cannot be comprehended. It is a peace that brings light to our journey and hope to our situation.

God’s gift of Love realized in the Messiah, that is Jesus Christ, reveals the fullness of God. The Book of Romans reminds all: “Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁵⁵ The Incarnate Christ restores and redeems humankind and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, people find healing and wholeness.

Forever with us, the Incarnate Christ is most apparent during moments of profound grief and loss. When lives are turned up-side-down and emotions are raw from pain and sorrow and suffering, the power of the Incarnation is needed. In those lonely, dark times of grief and loss, it is the Incarnation that ushers humankind into the presence of the living Christ. The next section will clarify the grief process to which Christ brings healing and restoration.

Part 2 – Grief Theory

Grief Defined

Grief is a normal and expected response to a loss – particularly a loss of someone or something to which an attachment had been established. Though grief can create similar reactions within people, such as anger, regret, and depression, grief is also personal and

⁵⁴ John 14:27, NRSV.

⁵⁵ Romans 8:38, 39, NRSV.

unique to each individual's loss. Melissa M. Kelley notes: "Experiences of grief are particular, complex, intricate, and multidimensional."⁵⁶

Grief initiates a roller-coaster ride of responses. On the dark side of grief the sense of alienation and loneliness, the reality of insomnia and weariness, the onset of tears and fear, the feelings of being lost in life and disconnected from others might be experienced. The more tender side of grief embraces the joy of remembering, the fact that a loved one's pain and suffering have ended and, for those who believe, the hope that God cares,⁵⁷ the assurance of life eternal,⁵⁸ and the promise of a future reunion.⁵⁹ Indeed, the journey of grief is multifaceted.

Description of Terms

The theory of grief commands a vocabulary of its own. When one discusses grief, it is helpful to have terms defined. The following are some terms that are used in discussions on grief.

- *Bereavement* refers to a state of loss. Melissa M. Kelley notes: "Bereavement, as defined by psychiatrists Harold Kaplan, Benjamin Sadock, and Jack Grebb, 'literally means the state of being deprived of someone by death.'⁶⁰
- *Grief* is a person's reaction to a loss. "When people experience a major loss, such as the death of someone they love, they may react to the loss not just in how they feel

⁵⁶ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief, Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010, p. 2.

⁵⁷ John 3:16, NRSV.

⁵⁸ John 11:25, NRSV.

⁵⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, NRSV.

⁶⁰ Melissa M. Kelley, p. 8.

- but in all the dimensions of their being. Their grief often include physical, behavioral, social, psychological (cognitive and affective), and spiritual reactions.”⁶¹
- *Mourning* “refers to what one does with one’s grief, or more precisely, the efforts one makes to manage grief.”⁶² Societal and cultural customs influence the way one mourns a loss.
 - *Healing* in grief is not the same as curing. It is not a remedy but rather a reconciling with a loss. The journey towards healing brings renewed fullness and meaning to life. “Healing is a holistic concept that embraces the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual realms.”⁶³
 - *Significant/important loss* is the way many define the event that begins the grieving process. Mitchell and Anderson, in their classic work *All Our Losses, all Our Grievs*, state that “unless we understand that all losses, even ‘minor’ ones, give rise to grief, we shall misunderstand its fundamental nature”⁶⁴ The terms “significant loss” and “important loss” are used, not to diminish the impact of all loss, but to differentiate between the minor losses that touch our lives and the major losses that knock us off our feet. Melissa M. Kelly notes: “The term grief is understood as one’s response to an important loss.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Charles A. Carr, “Anticipatory Grief and Mourning: An Overview,” *Living with Grief: Before and After the Death*, Kenneth J. Doka, editor, Hospice Foundation of America, 2007, p. 10.

⁶² Charles A. Carr, p. 11.

⁶³ Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D., *Understanding Your Grief, Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing for Your Heart*, Colorado, Companion Press, 2003, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grief: Resources for Pastoral Care*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Kelley, p. 8.

- *Anticipatory grief* occurs when one is forewarned of a potential loss. “‘Anticipatory grief’ is not simply grief begun in advance; it is different from post-mortem grief both in duration and form.”⁶⁶
- *Prolonged grief/unresolved grief* is a reaction to grief that “continues to interfere with a person’s ability to function for several years or longer after the loved one’s death.”⁶⁷
The person can become dysfunctional and withdrawn. When grief takes over, the person is overwhelmed with sadness.
- *Recovery* is a forward-moving process with no given time frame. “Recovery means claiming your circumstances instead of your circumstances claiming you and your happiness....Recovery is one day realizing that your ability to talk about the losses you’ve experienced is indeed normal and healthy.”⁶⁸

Models of Grief

Grief accompanies any important loss that we have experienced. It magnifies the emotions that are triggered by these tough and troubled times. The most talked and written about loss is the loss of a loved one. But there is a plethora of losses that can plunge a person into grief – the loss of a job or a family heirloom, the crumbling of a marriage or a change in family dynamics, the devastation brought on by a natural disaster or war, the difficulty in processing abuse or infertility, the shock and pain of injustice and incest. James and

⁶⁶ Charles A. Carr, as quoted from Fulton, p. 14.

⁶⁷ George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life after Loss*, New York, Basic Books, 2009, p. 96.

⁶⁸ John W. James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, New York, Harper-Collins Publishers, 2009, p. 7.

Friedman write: “Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by the end of or change in a familiar pattern of behavior.”⁶⁹

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a pioneer in the area of grief. Her book, *On Death and Dying*, introduced five stages of grief for the dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Over the course of years, these stages have been challenged and misused. In a book that she later co-authored with David Kessler, the authors write:

The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is an individual as our lives.⁷⁰

In their continued study of grief, Kubler-Ross and Kessler no longer stop with a clear delineation of stages of grief. They now discuss the stages within the process of grief. This includes talk on theory of grief, on the inspiration which impacts grief, and on practical advice. Kubler-Ross and Kessler see the process of grief incorporating both the inner world of grief, which includes areas like resentment, life beliefs and punishment, and the outer world of grief, which includes anniversaries and holidays, finances and letter writing (to the deceased), age and sex. They also include an appreciation of the grieving process with children, the difficulty of working through multiple losses, and the trauma associated with a sudden death. Kubler-Ross and Kessler note:

Grief is real because our loss is real. Each grief has its own imprint, as distinctive and as unique as the person we lost. The pain of loss is so intense, so heartbreaking, because in loving we deeply connect with another human being, and grief is the reflection of the connection that has been lost. We think we want to avoid grief, but really it is the pain of the loss we want to avoid. Grief is the healing process that ultimately brings us comfort in our pain.⁷¹

⁶⁹ John W. James and Russell Friedman, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, New York, Scribner, 2005, p. 3.

⁷¹ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, p. 203.

Over the past two decades, the understanding of grief has led to modifications in the way researchers present models of grief. Despite the former embrace of the “stages” of grief, which tend to be linear in nature, the newer models lean towards tasks within the “process” of grief.

Ken Doka, editor of *Living with Grief: Before And After the Death*, notes several new applications of grief models. Each one has a different approach to the grieving process. They focus less on getting through the grief and more on dealing with the effect that loss has on living.

J.W. Worden’s saw mourning as having 4 tasks:

1. To accept the reality of the loss;
2. To work through the pain of grief;
3. To adjust to an environment where the deceased is missing;
4. To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life.⁷²

His model demonstrates that he respects the individuality of grief. The tasks are not ordered which allows one to move through them as one chooses and when one is ready.

T. A. Rando created the “R” process. He, too, saw grief as having many levels. His breakdown of the process included:

recognizing the loss; reacting to the separation; recollecting and re-experiencing the deceased and the relationship; relinquishing the old attachments to the deceased and the old assumptive world; readjusting to move adaptively into the new world without forgetting the old; and reinvesting.⁷³

Margaret Strobe and Henk Schur have authored *The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement*. They suggest “that successful coping in bereavement means oscillating

⁷² Kenneth J. Doka, “Challenging the Paradigm: New Understandings of Grief,” *Living with Grief: Before and After the Death*, Kenneth J. Doka, editor, Hospice Foundation of America, 2007, p. 90

⁷³ Doka, p. 91.

between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented process.”⁷⁴ Melissa M. Kelley, noting the proposal by Strobe and Schur, explains: “A person may have both painful times and restorative times when dealing with loss. This Dual Process Model supports that in grief ‘both loss and life must be honored and balanced.’”⁷⁵

These new models embrace the understanding that grief is not an either/or but a both/and process. The journey of grief mirrors the journey of life. We grapple with the pain and sorrow of our loss even as we come to grips with the reality of everyday living.

It should be noted that Doka adds a fifth task to Worden’s approach: “To rebuild spiritual systems challenged by the loss.”⁷⁶ He writes: “This task recognizes that some losses challenge personal spiritual belief systems, causing individuals to question and possibly redefine their faith.”⁷⁷ The impact grief has on faith can be significant.

Grief and Faith

The experience of grief can separate us from reality, from society, and from life as we had known it. Grief becomes a deep, foreboding presence of darkness, pain, and loneliness. The book of Proverbs states: “Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief.”⁷⁸ The feelings so clearly stated in Proverbs give us a sense of separation which can seem as if our faith cannot support us in the suffering. In the midst of grief, many of us begin to feel this as the antithesis of what God offers in Jesus Christ for Jesus says, “As the Father

⁷⁴ Doka, p. 91.

⁷⁵ Melissa M. Kelley, p. 23.

⁷⁶ Doka, p. 91.

⁷⁷ Doka, p. 91.

⁷⁸ Proverbs 14: 13, NRSV.

has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”⁷⁹ It is God’s love that can help God’s people as they face their grief if people are willing to receive it.

The Bible presents many faces of grief: the Israelites and Samuel, Job and Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. All knew the shadows that befall the bereaved. All knew the impact of grief.

The impact of grief on the Israelites was significant. It touched their lives, their relationships and, at times, their faith.⁸⁰ They mourned both the loss of life and the loss of community. But there was more to grieve. As Douglas R. A. Hare notes: “The people of Israel mourned over the injustice of the day and their sinfulness.”⁸¹

The Bible gives examples of the highs and lows of life, especially the laments within the Book of Psalms. A careful reading finds a richness in the deep expressions of life and death, faith and doubt. The sensitive nature of the psalms of lament can be most helpful to people who are experiencing the pain of grief. An example is found in Psalm 31 which says:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.⁸²

We can connect with the psalmist’s emotions of despair and mourning. There is a link between our experience and God’s Word found in this Psalm.

The Gospels also provide examples of grieving. The Lord Jesus was called to tomb of Lazarus, his friend. “When he saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also

⁷⁹ John 15:9, NRSV.

⁸⁰ Psalm 13 exemplifies this: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”

⁸¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993, p.38. (As previously noted, grief touches many areas on many levels.)

⁸² Psalm 31:9, 10, NRSV.

weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” When he went to Lazarus’ tomb, “Jesus began to weep.”⁸³

When Jesus was at the Mount of Olives, he said to his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me."⁸⁴ Then he knelt down and prayed, “‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’” In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.”⁸⁵

Jesus, the Incarnate Christ, knew anguish and suffering. But He also knew the love of God. That love, which Christ embodies to God’s people, is the ultimate expression of God’s compassion and care.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”⁸⁶ About this William Barclay writes:

The Greek word for ‘to mourn’, used here, is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. It is the word which is used for mourning for the dead, for the passionate lament for one who was loved. It is defined as the kind of grief which takes such a hold on a [person] that it cannot be hid.⁸⁷

The New Testament provides numerous examples of the comfort which Christ offers to the grieving. When Jesus saw a woman mourning the death of her daughter, He was filled with compassion. He spoke and life was restored to the little girl.⁸⁸ When he passed by a widow whose only son had died, he said to her, “Woman, do not weep.” He then commanded the boy to rise and gave him back to his mother.⁸⁹ When Mary was weeping at the empty

⁸³ John 11:33, 35, NRSV.

⁸⁴ Matthew 26:38, NRSV.

⁸⁵ Luke 22:41, 42, 44, NRSV.

⁸⁶ Matthew 5:4, NRSV.

⁸⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, volume 1, The Daily Study Bible Series*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 93.

⁸⁸ Mark 5:39-41, NRSV.

⁸⁹ Luke 7:12-15, NRSV.

tomb, Jesus came to her in her hour of need. Jesus knew her anguish and dispelled her sorrow when he called her name, “Mary!”⁹⁰

When the disciples were overcome with grief after His crucifixion, Jesus met them in the upper room and said, “Peace be with you.”⁹¹ He knew they needed reassurance. And when Thomas could not believe in the resurrection because his loss was overwhelming and his faith was battered, Jesus met him and provided the proof that Thomas needed. Thomas replied, “My Lord and my God.”⁹²

Jesus brings comfort to the bereaved through the compassion and love of God. Phillip Bennett, a pastoral psychotherapist, suggests that when we have God as our anchor, the journey of grief can be negotiated more efficiently because it is wrapped in God’s love.

About this Melissa Kelley writes:

Without God as our secure base, our love of others easily becomes distorted by our fear of loss: we cling to others for fear of losing them (which may, in fact, drive them away, fulfilling our worst fear). Or we may try to avoid the pain of loss by avoiding intimacy altogether...the secure base of God’s love will not take away our losses but it can help us discover an abiding Presence that sustains us even in the midst of things that are passing away. In letting ourselves be loved by God, we form an attachment to the only One who cannot leave us.⁹³

As we walk with Jesus Christ, our lives are enriched. Christ’s love imparts peace and hope. Christ restores and redeems humankind and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, people find healing and wholeness. In our ongoing relationship with the Incarnate Christ, God’s mystery, God’s grace, and God’s love are offered. For us who grieve, our relationship with the Incarnate Christ leads to hope and begins the journey to restoration.

⁹⁰ John 20:16, NRSV.

⁹¹ John 20:18, NRSV.

⁹² John 20:28, NRSV.

⁹³ Melissa M. Kelly, p. 59.

Though much of the research on grief centers on death, grief experiences also occur with other kinds of significant losses. For example, a divorce, the loss of a friendship, or a move to another neighborhood will trigger grief. The destruction of a home in a disaster, the transition to unemployment, or the trouncing of a dream for the future are losses that need to be grieved. Even life changes can move us into grief: retirement from work, the diagnosis of a serious disease, or the process of aging all suggest a loss.

Each experience with grief is unique to the person and yet when the experience is shared in community, the process of restoration can be enhanced. The next section will express the ways in which the Incarnation can be powerfully present through the experience of grief as Christ is shared in community.

Part 3 – Community Theory

Community Defined

Community can be an important aspect in people’s lives. Community gives a sense of stability and a perception of family. It can act as a support system and a sounding board. Community can help in raising a child and community can assist in the burial of a loved one.

In its broadest sense, community can be defined as a group of people who live in a common location. As a way of bonding together, people who live within a certain geographical location create “welcome packets” or hold “block parties” or set up “neighborhood watch” programs. Though a person’s or family’s residential address may be happenstance, there is the possibility for a connection between the neighbors to occur. Community can be formed.

Community can identify a group of people who has a common background. Within a city's limits, one can find neighborhoods which tout titles like "Little Italy" and "China Town." Within these areas, ethnicity and the sharing of a similar heritage creates an extended family

Structured self-help groups which meet on a regular basis, like Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Eating Disorders Anonymous, Cancer Support Group, and Weight Watchers become community for people with similar needs. In these groups people find support from others who have similar addictions and habits. Even Hospice care can become community for the dying and the grieving. These micro-communities allow the grieving to embrace their similar concerns and needs.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt that the way faith could be shared with others was in community. He believed that community brought strength and joy to the faithful. Bonhoeffer considered Christian community a privilege⁹⁴ and a gift of grace. He writes:

Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God had bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.⁹⁵

Bonhoeffer established Finkenwalde as his way of bringing community to his brothers in ministry. At Finkenwalde the men lived with one another in a Christian context. Bonhoeffer believed that community happened "through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."⁹⁶ He saw the strength of community as a spiritual strength.

In community the people's faith is encouraged and deepened. Bonhoeffer writes:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" – this is the Scripture's praise of life together under the Word. But now

⁹⁴ Psalm 133:1, NRSV: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity."

⁹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc, 1954, p. 28.

⁹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 31.

we can rightly interpret the words ‘in unity’ and say, ‘for brethren to dwell together through Christ.’ For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. ‘He is our peace.’ Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.⁹⁷

Often in his writings Bonhoeffer used the word “community” rather than “church” to define the “body of Christ.” This supported his understanding of the power within community. Bonhoeffer never had a love for the institutional church – the one he knew from his childhood in Germany. He preferred *ecclesia*⁹⁸ rather than the organized, cultural setting – explaining the difference as where you choose to be rather than where you are assigned to be.⁹⁹

There is something to be learned from different communal experiences. One can find power when people gather. Within the context of Christian community, Christ is present. Jesus explains: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”¹⁰⁰ Through the Incarnate Christ found in community with the faithful, we are drawn back into right relationship with God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Community and Scripture:

In the Christian faith, the Bible brings a message of comfort and hope, peace and grace, joy and love to individuals as well as to the community at large. The Bible ascribes praise to God with one voice and also calls God’s people to corporate worship. The Bible’s message speaks to those who walk alone and those who journey together. It speaks to those who grieve.

⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, p. 39.

⁹⁸ *Ecclesia* would be the assembly of the people

⁹⁹ Dr. John Burgess, class notes from DM00E: Bonhoeffer, PTS, June 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 18:20, NRSV.

The Book of Psalms presents a microcosm of the heart of the Judeo-Christian scriptures...lament and praise, thanksgiving and worship, song and prayer. It embraces both the personal and the corporate life. Luther said the Psalter “might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.”¹⁰¹

Psalm 130 gives example of Scripture that deals with both the personal power in individual lives and the corporate power within the community. It is a song written for individual use and corporate application. James L Mays addresses the usefulness of Psalm 130 as being “for all who found themselves in the depths of existence.”¹⁰²

In Walter Brueggemann’s terms, this psalm is categorized as a psalm of disorientation. Psalms of disorientation “are songs lament, protest, and complaint about the incoherence that is experienced in the world.”¹⁰³ He sees Psalm 130 as uncomplicated and the “clearest and the most terse of all the psalms.”¹⁰⁴ The condition of the writer or his whereabouts seems to be inconsequential to the message. What is important is that God is with the writer (individual) and with the nation (corporate). God hears; God acts; God forgives; God redeems – for the one and for the all.

The message of Psalm 130 is that both the individual and the community are dependent on God. Through God and God alone, humankind - individual and corporate - which is in the grip of “disorientation,” can claim the promise that “new orientation” – a refocus on God – is within reach.

¹⁰¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:254, James. L Mays, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1994, p. 1.

¹⁰² James. L Mays, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1994, p. 405.

¹⁰³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms – A Theological Commentary*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984, p. 51-52.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Brueggemann, , p. 104.

Many times life situations separate people from their community and the support network in their lives. Relocation, a new job opportunity, family responsibility, death and divorce are but a few situations that separate people from their community, their family, and their friends. It is the love of the Lord Jesus which bridges the gap made by life situations. God's Word emphasizes the importance of individuality and of community.

Community and Grief

Community can be a positive force in the journey called grief. It is a way for us to come face to face with the Incarnate Christ. Melissa Kelley says this:

One's faith community plays a potentially enormous role in one's coping with loss. In a Christian context, the faith community comes together to recall the story of God's love incarnated in Jesus Christ. And we try, however imperfectly, to incarnate this love for one another, especially by holding one another in times of suffering and struggle.¹⁰⁵

As the Holy Spirit moves us to minister within and through the community, members are embraced by God's love as expressed in Christ. This happens in many ways: the sharing of stories, discussion time, prayer time, and in times of silence to name but a few. Even when we are unaware of God's grace and God's love, the Spirit works through community and leads us into healing.

We may not sense Christ; we may not feel Christ; we may not even believe that Christ is near. Yet, through the words and actions of others, we experience the Incarnation and the expression of Christ's love. As Alan D. Wolfelt explains:

Sharing your pain with others won't make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Melissa M. Kelley, p. 116.

¹⁰⁶ Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D., p. 126.

As followers of Christ, the “bonds of love” that connect us is the eternal love of Christ. Jesus says, “I will *never* leave you or forsake you.”¹⁰⁷ (*italic emphasis added*) The promise is that we are always united with Christ through the Spirit given by God.¹⁰⁸

The inspiration of the Incarnate Christ and the realization of Christ’s love are expressed by the Holy Spirit as the community shares with others. The Spirit works to bring God’s people into the love which is shared between Father and Son.

The Holy Spirit is the bond of union between the Father and Son and the bond between Christ and us. Faith is the confidence that because we are united with Jesus Christ, all that is his has become ours, and all that is ours, broken and feeble as it most likely is, is now also his, and in him is healed and made holy before God.¹⁰⁹

The mystery of the Incarnation absorbs us into Christ where we can experience healing and wholeness, restoration and hope, grace and love.

Especially to the grieving, the gathered community becomes the recipient of the Incarnate Christ. God’s Spirit, moving in and through the people, touches lives, expresses love, and promotes healing. Even when people are so broken that they are unable to seek God, God touches them. God reaches through His children to touch the lives of others. Jesus says: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”¹¹⁰ That is community at its best – allowing God’s love to be realized through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰⁷ Hebrews 13:5, NRSV.

¹⁰⁸ John 14:26, NRSV: “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

¹⁰⁹ Purves, p. 83.

¹¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:26, NRSV.

Conclusion

We are encouraged to “keep ourselves in the love of God [and to] look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”¹¹¹ Through the sharing of stories and the support of one another, the significance of Christ’s presence and the power of Christ’s love grow. Christ’s love, which may be realized in and through God’s children, can bring healing for our pain and our sorrow. Even as we journey with grief, the Incarnation of Christ imparts restoration and wholeness within and through community.

The intentional gathering of the grieving community fosters the recognition of the Incarnate Christ. Together the community journeys; together the community becomes the Body of Christ to one another; together the community finds healing. This leads to a realization of God’s love expressed in Christ. This love nurtures, sustains, and heals God’s people as they learn how to embrace their grief journey.

¹¹¹ Jude 1:21, NRSV.

Chapter 3 – The Project

Introduction

God's love, realized in the Incarnate Christ, can offer consolation to people who have experienced a loss, bring healing to the wounds of the grieving, and companion those along in the journey towards restoration. Though this can happen in many situations and in many places, my project will show how Christian community redefines and transforms this process. When people who have experienced a significant loss are in the company of God and one another, they can trust the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."¹¹²

Whenever a person experiences a significant loss, he or she enters into a journey of grief. This can be a time of tremendous stress generating feelings like loneliness, alienation, anger, and fear. Some want to share their feelings; others retreat in silent reflection. Grief is unique to each individual and yet there are similarities within each journey.

My first call to ministry was as a chaplain with Hospice. As I ministered with the dying and the bereaved, I realized the highs and lows, the ups and downs, the light and darkness of grief. I quickly learned about the loneliness grief generates as I counseled men and women in their struggle with the loss of their soul mates, their spouses, their parents, their children, their relatives, and their friends.

Though one-on-one interaction is meaningful and helps in the early days of grief, it was the grief support groups which I facilitated that allowed repressed feelings of bereavement to be released. Many said that the group finally put them in an environment

¹¹² Matthew 5:4, NRSV.

where they were not the ‘odd’ person out. They felt connected; they sensed that others understood; they experienced some relief. The impression was that the group imparted a care and compassion that had not been present in their lives since their loss.

This feedback became the catalyst for my project. The project as implemented offered a grief support group to members of a Christian community through a four-week course dealing with grief. It is based on the thesis that there is a connection between the healing for which grieving people yearn and the hope imparted within the gathered community. There is, in fact, a correlation between the care shared within the group and the love expressed in Christ. The Christian community becomes a source through which the Incarnate Christ works in, through, and with God’s people.

The project’s course used the acronym “COPE.” The letters of COPE denote themes: C – Connect with Community; O – Open our hearts to God’s Word; P – Place the loss in its appropriate space; and E – Embrace Christ and Experience healing.

The Scriptures support these themes by giving examples of healing and hope; of God’s care and God’s love. The power of Christ and the importance of community with the grieving are seen in the stories and the teachings of both the Old and New Testaments. The next part of this chapter takes four passages of Scripture that impart hope and direction for those journeying with grief. They are particularly appropriate to the grieving because they speak about God’s desire for relationships, about the highs and lows of life, about the blessings bestowed by Christ, and about the vastness of Christ’s love.

Part 1: Exegetical Study of Four Passages of Scripture

Genesis 1:26-27 (The Genesis passage supports the theme for “C” of COPE – Connect with Community.)

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The first two chapters of Genesis offer numerous images for God. The imagery includes God as monarch, as the One who speaks the universe into existence, and God as companion in the garden. God is depicted as king, as potter, and as friend. Terence E. Fretheim explains the impact that these metaphors have on our understanding of the Creator: "When considered in interaction with one another, these images provide a more relational model of creation than has been traditionally presented."¹¹³ Each one portrays a God who embraces the importance of relationships.

Chapter 1 of Genesis uses relational language within the deity. God says "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image."¹¹⁴ Though the "us" and "our" are not defined, their use depicts God in community with others. Derek Kidner explains:

The plural is interpreted by, e.g. Delitzsch and von Rad as including the angels, whom the Old Testament calls at times 'sons of God', or, generically, 'god(s)'.¹¹⁵

Though Kidner supports the concept of God's relational attribute, he does not embrace the idea that God sought council about creation from others outside the Godhead. He states: "Any implication that others had a hand in our creation is quite foreign to the

¹¹³ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, Nashville, Abington Press, 2005, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ Genesis 1:26 – italics added.

¹¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, volume 1, Genesis*, England, The Tyndale Press, 1967, p. 56.

chapter as a whole.”¹¹⁶ Kidner contends that the corporate language used in Genesis 1:26-27 depicts...

...the plural of fullness, which is found in the regular word for God (*elohim*) used with a singular verb; and this fullness, glimpsed in the Old Testament, was to be unfolded as trinity, in the further ‘we’ and ‘our’ of John 14:23 (with 14:17).¹¹⁷

Terence Fretheim has a different understanding. Rather than the “us” and “our” being pronouns for persons of the Trinity, he sees this language as depicting a divine council. He writes:

It is important to say that such mutuality within heavenly precincts does not entail an equality of God and the divine beings; God is God, and they are not. At the same time, the texts do not suggest that God’s role in their relationship is that of a king relating to his subjects. The relationship between God and the divine council is of such a nature that genuine interaction and mutual interdependence are characteristic. God certainly takes the initiative and extends the invitation to the divine council, but their participation is not understood to be perfunctory or minimalist; they have a genuine role to play, so much so that the product of their creative work is understood to be in the image of all involved.¹¹⁸

Fretheim explains that God does not dictate or work solo in the creation of humankind but shares the creative responsibility. God, who chooses to have communal interactions, invites the expression of a divine council into the creative process.

God’s desire for connection gives room for the possibility that God will also invite that which has been created in the image of God (humankind) to somehow be consulted about God’s created order.¹¹⁹ This is realized when God proclaims: “Let them [humankind] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of

¹¹⁶ Kidner, p. 56.

¹¹⁷ Kidner, p. 56.

¹¹⁸ Fretheim, p. 42.

¹¹⁹ Fretheim, p. 43.

the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”¹²⁰ In this way, the Creator continues to embrace community as God invites consultation with humankind from within the created order.

Though Genesis 1:26-27 shows relationships in the initial act of creation, the whole book of Genesis gives strong affirmation for the role of community: between God and deity, between God and humans, between humans and humans, and with humans and the created order. In this way, “the creator not only cherishes his creation but honors and respects it according to its own way in the relationship.”

This relational quality embraced by God is important to humanity:

On the one hand, humankind is a single entity. All human persons stand in solidarity before God. But on the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female. And none is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected. God is, according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual but as a community.¹²¹

In all aspects of life – in the good and the ugly, in the laughs and the tears, in our living and our dying, we need relationships and community. It is through relationships and within community that we are able to realize the fullness of God and to experience the completeness of humanity. This is helpful on the journey called grief.

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Matthew passage supports the theme for “O” of COPE – Open our hearts to God’s Word.)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will

¹²⁰ Genesis 1:26b, NRSV.

¹²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, (Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 34.

receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

The Sermon on the Mount is central to the Gospel of Matthew. Using Q as the source, Matthew sets the stage for Jesus' teaching which "indicates that he intends the Sermon on the Mount to be a Christological statement. It not only tells Christians how to live but emphasized the importance of Jesus."¹²²

Matthew's beatitudes are "primarily eschatological, though there may be some anticipation of the reward in the present."¹²³ The New Testament beatitudes can be read as a command for the present (entrance requirement¹²⁴) or a promise of grace for the future (eschatological warning¹²⁵).

Douglas Hare asks the difficult question: "Are they indicatives, testifying to God's grace, or imperatives, demanding obedient action?"¹²⁶ This has been debated over the centuries. Hare believes that both sides hold truth. It may be that Hare's equation should be joined with an "and" rather than an "or". In Hare's opinion, Matthew's beatitudes can be heard as both a voice of authority for the present and an expression of God's grace for the age to come. The outcome of each beatitude is not so much about happiness found in daily living but in the blessing found when one is in right relationship with God.

¹²² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, (Interpretation – A Bible commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993, p. 34.

¹²³ Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew (Sacra Pagina Series, volume 1)*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 82-83.

¹²⁴ Hare, p. 35.

¹²⁵ Hare, p. 35.

¹²⁶ Hare, p. 35.

Though the NRSV Bible translates the Greek *makarioi* as “blessed,” Hare gives several alternatives – “How fortunate is...”, “How lucky are...”, “Happy are...”, and “Congratulations to...”¹²⁷ – which change the impact of its meaning. He concludes that because of the nuances of the alternative translation in the secular world, “it is probably better to retain “blessed” as the English rendering because of the word’s religious associations.”¹²⁸

It must be noted that the blessings that Jesus bestows differ from other “blessings” found in the Bible. No conditions need to be met in order to receive this gift bestowed by the Lord. Eduard Schweizer explains:

The question is not really raised as to who will receive blessings, but rather how it is with all those on this earth who are poor, who hunger, who weep. For all those poor enough to have ears to hear, Jesus promised blessings, and with an authority that established future fulfillment in the present.¹²⁹

The Beatitudes have been lifted up as a banner for discipleship. In humility Christians embrace being “poor in spirit,” “meek” and “merciful.” They endure “mourning” and “hunger” and “persecution.” Many see the list as Christian values versus secular ways.

Douglas Harrington sees it differently:

The Beatitudes are neither philosophical nor sectarian ethics. The Beatitudes are thoroughly Jewish in form and content. They challenged those who made up “Israel” in Matthew’s time by delineating the kinds of persons and actions that will receive their full reward when God’s kingdom comes. They remind Christians today of the Jewish roots of their piety and challenge each generation to reflect on what persons and actions they consider to be important or “blessed.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Hare, p. 35.

¹²⁸ Hare, p. 36.

¹²⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, translated by David E. Green, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1975, p. 81.

¹³⁰ Harrington, p. 84.

Each of the Beatitudes embraces a specific trial found in daily living. People can understand the suffering; they can relate to the ordeal. Yet, there is also the promise of blessing within the hardship.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” Jesus says as one of the Beatitudes. The comfort is found in the presence of Christ. the Beatitude is also a measure for living a Christian life. Singularly and corporately, the Beatitudes impart the grace of God in the midst of loss and grief.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (The Ecclesiastes passage supports the theme for “P” of COPE – Place the loss in its appropriate space.)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

The interpretation of Ecclesiastes has always been controversial. “Some see it as affirming life; others see it as deeply pessimistic. Ecclesiastes attracts attention and resonates deeply with the existential struggles of people today.”¹³¹ Even as the writer, Qoheleth, attempts to makes sense of his world as he surveys and explains the positives and negatives that the journey of life offers, people today are always trying to find reasons for the highs and lows of life. This poem offers an uncharted rhythm connecting an optimistic outlook and a pessimistic stance.

¹³¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, Baker Academics, 2009, p. 17.

Ecclesiastes gives an “unflinchingly realistic perspective on the value of life.”¹³² Things happen that cannot be explained away...they just are. Throughout the centuries, scholars have challenged the critical reading of Ecclesiastes as part of the wisdom tradition. In light of this issue, Craig Bartholomew notes Walter Brueggemann’s sociological analysis. Brueggemann’s view tenders the negative reaction of the critics to Qoheleth’s writing:

Brueggemann has suggested that ‘Ecclesiastes articulates a conservative ideology that reflects social control and a concern for stability....The emancipatory side of wisdom is reflected in the embrace of creation in the Song of Solomon, the ideological dimension is articulated in Ecclesiastes.’ This view is a development of Brueggemann’s discernment of a royal (order) and a liberative trajectory in the Old Testament.¹³³

One of Qoheleth’s most famous poems is found in the first part of Chapter Three of Ecclesiastes. This is a “poem about time and the polarities of human activity. It is a source of both disillusionment and awe.”¹³⁴ What is important for Qoheleth is that every event has its time and its season. He then juxtaposes a series of contrasting issues in life – spelling out good and tough times. “Poetically, these pairs of opposites serve as poetic *merisms*; they convey a sense of the totality of human endeavor in all its manifold forms.”¹³⁵ Qoheleth does not delineate between the desired and the undesired. His point is that all have their place in the timeline of human life. In Qoheleth’s observation, with every step that humans take, there is another step waiting.

This supports Qoheleth’s understanding of the temporary state of each activity. William Brown explains: “No one activity has universal sway any more than exhaling or inhaling dominates the rhythm of breathing. Permanence is not part of the chronological

¹³² William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes, (Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 2000, p. 10.

¹³³ Bartholomew, p. 38.

¹³⁴ Brown, p. 40.

¹³⁵ Brown, p. 41.

equation.”¹³⁶ It should be noted that Qoheleth “is not saying what people should do but is merely describing situations and events people find themselves in.”¹³⁷ He tries to show the pulse of human life even as he embraces its temporal nature.

Bartholomew continues: “Qoheleth’s point is that the order in creation extends across the whole of it and hence he enumerates the gamut of human life and activities.”¹³⁸ Qoheleth’s concern is not as much about what is taking place as it is about what are the “seasons” of the situations.

As we journey through life, Qoheleth’s observations are poignant to any situation we face. He believes that life gives a time for this and a time for that and yet there is no meter for the length of a “season.”

This is the message that we need to hear – especially when we are facing the tough times – those times of weeping and mourning, warring and dying; loss and grief. What matters to Qoheleth and ultimately to us is that, though we do not know the length of a season, there is promise that every circumstance is temporary. As Qoheleth declares, each situation is only for its “season.”

Ephesians 3:16-19 (The Ephesians passage supports the theme for “E” of COPE – Embrace Christ and Experience healing.)

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

¹³⁶ Brown, p. 41.

¹³⁷ Bartholomew, p. 162.

¹³⁸ Bartholomew, p. 163.

This passage from Ephesians recognizes the vastness of the Lord's love. The Apostle Paul explains Christ's love as being multi-dimensional. He says that Christ's love has breadth and length and height and depth. In light of Paul's words, Bryan Chapell explains the Divine's love this way:

God's love for his people is as long as eternity past, so wide as to include all nations, so high as to ring praises from angels in heaven, and so deep as to cancel the claims of hell on our soul. Knowledge of such magnitude grants more than comfort, more than assurance, and even more that joy. Knowledge of this magnitude is power!¹³⁹

This power of divine love, imparted by the Spirit, is "the resurrection power of Christ that resides in believers and makes us spiritually alive."¹⁴⁰ A continuing theme throughout his epistle, "Paul compares this power residing in us who are the living stones of God's temple to the Shekinah glory that resided in the tabernacle of Israel (Ephesians 2:21-22)."¹⁴¹

Paul knows that the resurrection power of the Lord creates the body of Christ and the community of faith. He understands that this power opens us to the indwelling of Jesus, the Incarnate Christ. Paul believes that hope is imparted as the power strengthens us to do Christ's work. Ralph P. Martin explains: "God's power may be seen at work in the church in which God's fullness dwells by the presence of Christ and the Spirit."¹⁴²

Paul prays that this power, which comes from God's love, may work through God's people and empower Christ's church. As Christians, we must be grounded in Christ's love, which is imparted through the Spirit. This love is the catalyst for the renewing and strengthening of our inner being. It is greater than our understanding and brings us into God's fullness. Motivated by God's love, we gain strength; we receive power.

¹³⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing Company, 2009, p. 149.

¹⁴⁰ Chapell, p. 157.

¹⁴¹ Chapell, p. 158.

¹⁴² Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, (Interpretation – A Bible commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, Louisville, John Knox Press, 1991, p. 34.

Within this writing from Paul there is a description of the Trinity. Each member of the Trinity does specific work. About this Chapell says:

Paul has prayed that the *Father*, out of his riches (Ephesians 3:14-16a), will provide power through the *Spirit* (Ephesians 3:16b), so that *Christ* may dwell in the believers' hearts (Ephesians 3:17a). The Father wills for the Spirit to be the instrument by which Christ takes over our heart and provides our identity.¹⁴³ (italics added)

With Christ in charge of our lives, we can claim our identity in Him. When we unite with the character of Christ, He becomes the Light of our path; He grants us the power of His love.

The power of the new spiritual life is ours not by our will or strength but solely through trusting in what he [Christ] provides. In trusting that his righteousness will redeem from our sin and substitute for our destination we find his strength is ours.¹⁴⁴

Paul is talking about the basics of faith in Christ. He knows that we need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ again and again. To that end, Paul prays that God will equip us so that we “may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”¹⁴⁵ We will be filled with the fullness of God when we have Christ. This is significant for those who are grieving. We are not alone; Christ is with us. In Christ, we can experience divine love.

Part II: COPE and Grief

A while ago, I took a walk along the river near my home. What once was a picture of calmness and tranquility had been changed into a muddy, raging, uncontrollable surge of

¹⁴³ Chapell, p. 158.

¹⁴⁴ Chapell, p. 159.

¹⁴⁵ Ephesians 3:18-19a, NRSV.

water. The catalyst for the change was the winds and rain of Hurricane Irene. Yet days later the river, though not as it once was, had been transformed. As the water receded and the force of the current diminished, the river seemed renewed and refreshed. The river coped with the storm and survived.

This can be a metaphor for grieving individuals. As we meander along life's path, the suddenness of loss smacks us and our lives are immediately changed into a muddy, raging, and sometimes uncontrollable surge of emotions. The catalyst for the change is our grief. Yet, as time passes, we can experience transformation. We cope with our loss. We may never be as we once were but we will find ways to heal; we will realize times of restoration; we will sense a point of renewal and refreshment. Like the river which "coped" with the storm and survived, we can cope with loss and live.

Cope means different things to different people facing different circumstances. The nuances within the synonyms for cope show a vast degree of expressions: manage, handle, deal with, endure, struggle, confront, survive, muddle through¹⁴⁶ to name but a few. They range from just making it through an experience (muddle through) to living with and out of an experience (survive). Chris L. Kleinke states: "People who cope most successfully are those who are equipped with a battery of coping strategies and who are flexible in adapting their responses to the situation."¹⁴⁷

We live in a society where it is thought that good things are supposed to come to good people and the bad things are punishment for the bad people. Unfortunately this "Pollyanna" mindset is found only in fairytales. So, when bad things happen – when

¹⁴⁶ Thesaurus: English (U.S.), a research help within Microsoft Word 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Chris. L. Kleinke, *Coping with Life Challenges, Second Edition*; Long Grove, IL, Waveland Press, Inc. 2002; p. 17.

someone dies or gets divorced or is the victim of injustice – we cry foul play. We don't know how to respond. We don't know how to cope. Kleinke explains:

People want easy answers to their problems – a pill, a quick fix, or a guaranteed solution that doesn't require much cost or effort. Successful coping is not the result of discovering a single, fail-proof response. It is an attitude and a life philosophy.

Through personal experiences as a Hospice chaplain and parish pastor, I have heard the grieving cry out in anguish: "I can't cope!" It is this cry that led me to my project. I am not suggesting that faith can be reduced to a coping mechanism. Nor do I believe that everything becomes manageable when one joins a small group on grief. What I do know is that God's love is so vast that it can encompass our pain and our anguish; it can wipe away the tears and is the balm that helps the process of healing and restoration. It is God's love which one finds in a Christian grief support group.

Grief is a personal journey but the path can and should be shared. Having learned from his own grief walk, Charlie Walton explains:

Don't let your pride convince you that you need to be independent and never beholden to anyone. You will go through this [grief] alone...but you'll go through this alone better if you let people help.¹⁴⁸

We need one another. We need community to help us on the journey of grief. We cope better when we solicit the support of others. To this end Kleinke writes:

A good support system does much to help in the recovery from loss. A support system can provide nurturance and bolster your sense of self-worth, trust, and live direction.¹⁴⁹

Jesus maintains the power of community when he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."¹⁵⁰ We are individuals but gathered we are

¹⁴⁸ Charlie Walton, *When There Are No Words: Finding your way to cope with loss and grief*, Ventura, CA, Pathfinder Publishing of California, 1996, p. 40.

¹⁴⁹ Kleinke, p. 180.

more than the sum. For when we join together as believers, we become the body of Christ,¹⁵¹ supporting one another by offering hope and peace, guidance and care. Kleinke notes that “the benefits we receive from other people have a lot to do with our expectations and attitudes.”¹⁵² As Christ’s body we are to give and we are to receive. Together we manage, handle, deal with, endure, struggle, confront, survive, and muddle through our grief. Together we cope.

Part III. The Design of the Four Week Study

My project uses a study that I designed and wrote.¹⁵³ This course is developed for Christians who have experienced a significant loss in their lives. In a small group setting, participants realize that together they can find the strength to journey with grief in a healthy manner. Within the gathered community, the presence of the Incarnate Christ is able to bring hope and aids in the healing process.

As a community with a common connection named grief, a group of people who have experienced a significant loss gathered together for four weeks. Using the acronym COPE to delineate the focus for each class, we shared our stories and the emotions brought on by our grief. We read Scripture and prayed. We shared our faith and the beliefs that instruct our trust in God. Some verbalized about their journey; others connected through silent participation. The course was designed to offer moments of compassion and caring and time to realize God’s grace and renewal as our Lord walks with us in our grief.

¹⁵⁰ Matthew 18:20, NRSV.

¹⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 12:24, NRSV.

¹⁵² Kleinke, p. 39.

¹⁵³ See Appendixes.

COPE Class One: C – Connect with Community¹⁵⁴

The subject matter for class one was community. “The heaviness of grief can be lessened when we CONNECT with COMMUNITY.”¹⁵⁵ The teaching, scripture readings, and discussion focused on God’s desire for relationships and our need for relationships.

The evening opened with prayer. There was a time of introduction of each class member. Thoughts about our journey with grief were shared.

The book of Genesis gives strong affirmation about the role of community. Genesis 1:26-27 was used as initial support for the power of relationships. It was meaningful to remember that God chose to work with others. Knowing about the relationship within the Godhead and the relationship between the Creator and humankind maintains that community is valuable.

Sharing within the group centered on the power of community. Grief can pull us into our own dark corner. The positive experience of a caring community has the power to cajole us back into a relationship – with the Creator and with humankind.

Additional Scripture passages were used to augment the power of community and impact of relationships. The promise of Christ’s presence when believers gather together is found in Matthew 18:20.¹⁵⁶ Here it is noted that community will be embraced by the Incarnate Christ. Galatians 6:2¹⁵⁷ expresses the power that relationships can have as people share with one another.

The individuals who gathered for this class experienced firsthand the power of community. In sharing and caring, they realized that the heaviness of grief can be lessened

¹⁵⁴ See Appendix A.

¹⁵⁵ The Rev. Debra May Cerra, “COPE with Grief,” Class One.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew 18:20, NRSV: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

¹⁵⁷ Galatians 6:2, NRSV: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

when we connect with others. The class ended with a prayer asking for continued guidance from the Lord as this newly formed community embraced each other on their journey of grief.

COPE Class Two: O – Open Our Hearts to God’s Word¹⁵⁸

The subject matter for class two was God’s Word – the Scriptures. “It is helpful to OPEN our hearts to the healing found in God’s Word.”¹⁵⁹ The teaching, scripture readings, and discussion focused on the desire God has for our well being and how God imparts God’s blessings.

The evening opened with prayer. Time was given for questions about the previous class. We discussed thoughts about the past week.

The Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:1-12, speak about specific trials of life and the blessed outcome that comes from the Lord. People, especially those who are grieving, recognize the suffering; they relate to the ordeal; they yearn for the blessings. When we realize that there is the promise of blessings within each hardship, hope is found.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,”¹⁶⁰ Jesus says. Whether an individual or a community is listening, the Beatitudes impart the grace of God in the midst of loss and grief. The promise is that we will be drawn into the presence of Christ.

Sharing within the group centered on the power found in the scriptures. Grief can have a way of adding cynicism to our thoughts. Does God really care? Is God really here? These questions and questions about the meaning of the Beatitudes were discussed.

¹⁵⁸ See Appendix B.

¹⁵⁹ The Rev. Debra May Cerra, “COPE with Grief,” Class Two.

¹⁶⁰ Matthew 5:4, NRSV.

Additional Scripture passages were used to augment the power of God’s Word. The promise of God’s provision is found in Romans 8:31b-32.¹⁶¹ God, in Christ, is on our side and wants the best for us. Matthew 11:28-30¹⁶² expressed the care that Christ offers to believers.

The participants experienced the power of the Scriptures. In sharing and caring, they realized that it helps when they are open to the healing found in God’s Word. The class ended with a prayer asking for help in trusting the promises of Scripture at the group left with a renewed understanding of the power found in God’s Word.

COPE Class Three: P – Place the Loss in Its Appropriate Space¹⁶³

The subject matter for class three was the timeline of life. ““We must live today by PLACING our loss in the appropriate space.”¹⁶⁴ The teaching, scripture readings, and discussion focused on the importance of living in the present rather than the past.

The evening opened with prayer. Time was given for questions about the previous class. We discussed thoughts about the past week.

The book of Ecclesiastes and the poem about the “seasons of time” found in chapter 3:1-8 carry a message that we need to hear – especially when we are facing tough times – times of weeping and mourning, times of loss and grief. Though we don’t know the length of the season in which we are living, there is promise that every circumstance is temporary. As the writer of Ecclesiastes declares, each situation is only for a “season.”

¹⁶¹ Romans 8:31b-32, NRSV: “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”

¹⁶² Matthew 11:28-30, NRSV: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

¹⁶³ See Appendix C.

¹⁶⁴ The Rev. Debra May Cerra, “COPE with Grief,” Class Three.

Sharing within the group focused on the importance of remembering our loss while keeping the event as part of our history rather than making it our present reality. There was a sense of comfort when, as we discussed the highlights and low point found in our individual timelines, we realized the many seasons that we had experienced in our lives.

Additional Scripture passages were used to support the need to claim our seasons of life and the promise that Christ is with us no matter what we face. When we are anxious, the promise that Christ cares is noted in 1 Peter 5:7.¹⁶⁵ Matthew 28:20 gives us Christ's promises that His care and His love will be with us forever.¹⁶⁶

Participants experienced a sense of peace when they realized that everything in life is temporary in nature. They spoke of the hope they felt when remembering that everything is framed with the promise that Christ is with us yesterday, today, and forever. The class ended with a prayer for help in embracing the fullness of life – the positive seasons and the difficult ones.

COPE Class Four: E – Embrace Christ and Experience healing¹⁶⁷

The subject matter for class four was our need for Christ. “When we EMBRACE Christ, we EXPERIENCE the healing found in Christ's love.”¹⁶⁸ The teachings, scripture readings, and discussion focused on the love of the Incarnate Christ at work in our lives.

The evening opened with prayer. Time was given for questions about the previous class. We discussed thoughts about the past week.

¹⁶⁵ 1 Peter 5:7, NRSV: “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 28:20, NRSV: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

¹⁶⁷ See Appendix D.

¹⁶⁸ The Rev. Debra May Cerra, “COPE with Grief,” Class Four.

In Ephesians 3:16-19, Paul conveys the importance of having Christ in our lives. When Christ is in charge, our identity is in Him. When we are united with His character, Christ becomes the Light of our path; He grants us the power of His love. Our journey through grief may not be easy but we are not alone. We have Christ with us.

An additional Scripture passage was used to support our understanding of the vastness of God's love as defined in the Incarnate Christ. John 3:16¹⁶⁹ speaks of the gift of God's love, the gift of God's Son, the gift of faith, and the gift of salvation. This passage expresses the depth of Divine love.

Throughout the class, participants experienced the power of the Incarnation. In times of sharing and times of caring, in quiet moments and in the chatter of community, they realized afresh the love of Christ. The love of Christ found in the Incarnation and within the gathered community enabled this group to claim healing and restoration even as they continued on with their journey of grief.

Conclusion

When life sends catastrophic situations that throw us into a tailspin – when we face the death of someone we love; when our significant other walks out on us, when we are the casualties of injustice or the victims of incest – we cry, we hurt, we retreat. We grieve. We feel removed from God's grace and God's mercy and we think no hope is to be found. But that is not the case. Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in

¹⁶⁹ John 3:16, NRSV: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

weakness.”¹⁷⁰ In spite of our frailty, our pain, and our weakness God’s grace – the infinite love, mercy, favor, and undeserved blessings bestowed by God – is at work.

Sometimes it is tough to accept that God is present. It is even more difficult to claim God in the dark times of loss and grief. Yet God’s Good News – that is the Word made flesh,¹⁷¹ the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ – is “the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.”¹⁷² God’s love, found in the Incarnate Christ, is able to heal the wounds of the grieving and help them begin the journey of restoration.

¹⁷⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:9, NRSV.

¹⁷¹ John 12:48, NRSV.

¹⁷² John 1:5, NRSV.

Chapter 4 – Evaluation of the Project

Introduction

Grief is the natural response to loss. Its journey is one which initiates a host of emotions. The dark side of grief fosters a sense of alienation and loneliness, the reality of insomnia and weariness, and the onset of tears and fear as the realization of the loss grows. Grief also embraces a sense of joy in remembering our loved ones, an assurance in knowing that pain and suffering have ended and, for those who believe in Christ, a hope in God's promise that our loved ones are with the Lord. Indeed, the journey of grief is complex and complicated.

Though the impact of grief can offer a common script for the bereaved, there is also a personal side to grief. Grief initiates feelings that tend to separate us from reality, from society, and from life as it once was. Grief becomes a deep, foreboding presence of darkness, pain, and loneliness. We may pull away from family and friends. We believe the voice that says no one understands and no one cares. We retreat, unwilling or unable to reach out to others or to God.

Yet, as Christians, we are called to draw together for Christ says that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”¹⁷³ There is a connection between the healing of God's people and the realization of hope within the gathered community. There a correlation between the care within the group and the love found in Christ. Within the Christian community, the Incarnate Christ work in and through God's people.

The intentional gathering of the grieving fosters the recognition of the Incarnate Christ. As a community, people find restoration, experience the Body of Christ through

¹⁷³ Matthew 18:20, NRSV.

others, and share Christ's love with each other. Then, enveloped in Christ's love, there is a sense of nurturing, sustenance and healing as they embrace their individual grief journeys.

My project shows the power of God's love experienced within the grieving community. Using a course entitled "COPE with Grief," this four week journey allows the participants a time to connect with community, opens their hearts to the healing found in God's Word, places the loss in the appropriate space (the past rather than the present), and embraces Christ so that they can experience the healing found in Christ's love. The scripture chosen for each focus supports that particular theme.

Part I: Community Parameters

Faith Based Course

There are different types of grief support groups offered within our society. Each one has a unique approach in helping the bereaved. Some are strictly for grieving a death; some are for divorcees. It seems as if there are as many grief support groups as there are types of losses.

Though the different support groups in existence deal with the impact of loss, none seem to take into account a faith in Christ that existed before the loss. Faith can be rattled during a crisis and may need to be nurtured. This nurturing can happen when people gather in community and discuss the impact of God's Word. That is the intent of my project.

The course *COPE with Grief* is written for a Christian setting. This study has prerequisites for participation¹⁷⁴ which I believe are necessary. This course is not intended to initiate a faith in Christ but rather to use the faith already established as a catalyst for restoration and healing on the grief journey. Again, the support of Scripture is significant in accomplishing this.

Having Christian roots assumes that participants can define the language of faith – Jesus Christ, God, Holy Spirit, hope, reconciliation, healing, wholeness, love, scripture, Gospel, to name but a few. This base offers the opportunity to expand on the faith, challenge the faith, and use the faith as support rather than initiate and teach the faith

In any Christian group, there will be a diverse set of beliefs. This is true of the grief course that I held. Some participants showed a deep abiding faith, others were still challenged by the doctrines of the faith, and there were a few who were not sure how to articulate what being a Christian meant to them. During the course, the individuals jelled into a community as they shared thought about their beliefs and their doubts. They challenged each other and cared for one another as the scriptures were read and discussed, debated and digested. The impact of this process be summed up in one person’s comment after the first class: “I finally feel as if someone understands what I am going through.”

Looking back on the group, I sense that the shared grounding found in Christ and the diversity within individual beliefs enhanced the outcome of the course. The base was Jesus Christ; the love was God’s love, and the compassion and caring was the Holy Spirit at work. Within this setting, the Incarnate Christ was realized and embraced.

¹⁷⁴ Faith in Jesus Christ and an appreciation for God’s Word are two assumed parameters.

It is important to recognize and evaluate some of the group dynamics within the *COPE with Grief* course. The next section will deal with specific details of the participants for my project.

Gender Exclusivity

For the course I offered, the attendees were exclusively females. This was not by design. Rather, this came about because there were no grieving male participants of the church that could attend.

I see this unplanned exclusivity as more positive than negative. In co-ed small groups that I previously led, it was common for the women to dominate the discussion which allowed most men to sit and listen. With only women in the course, this was not an issue.

The emotional charge within the group also benefited from the gender exclusivity. When emotions surfaced, rarely was there any embarrassment within the group. The compassion offered and received was genuine. Woman to woman sometimes took on a motherly role; other times the sharing was as with a sister.

The dynamics of the group would have been different if it had been a co-ed or a male only group. In my experiences, many men do not openly share their stories or their emotions. Within the co-ed group, men would have been able to silently sit back and listen.

If I offered the course to a small group of male participants, I suspect I would use a more structured approach with less discussion, especially at the beginning. Making this shift in the *COPE with Grief* course may allow the male population to be able to more fully embrace the impact of community.

In the future for this particular course, I will offer gender sensitive groups. With the enormity of emotion that is attached to grief, I sense that it would be beneficial to restrict the group to all males or all females.

Church Membership

Though all participants were affiliated with Calvary Presbyterian church, I do not see church affiliation as an important condition. Many of the participants, though claiming to be Christian, were not regular attendees in worship. For this course I believe that belief in Christ is necessary but church membership is not.

Relationships within the Group

Since all participants were local, there was concern that prior friendships would undermine the impact of the group. Though many did not know one another, there were several who had worked together within the church's ministries and two who were cousins. This did not have any significant bearing on the group.

The focus of the group was grief...the loss, the emotions, the journey. The centering within God's Word was so strong that prior relationships took back seat. The women were engaged with the subject matter of each class and not once was there chatter or secondary conversation within the group.

Diversity of the Significant Loss

Within the body of participants of the *COPE with Grief* group, there were many types of losses: the loss of parents and siblings, spouses and children, jobs and family homesteads,

divorce and separation. For some their grief journeys had just begun; for others the journey was less than twelve months old; for a few the walk was already a year or more. Yet each carried the burden and heartache of grief. Each was looking for a new appreciation of this journey.

Though there was a diversity of losses and the grief timeline varied from individual to individual, the course made an impact on each person. The focus of the course was not centered on the loss. My project focused on the restoration and healing which the grieving find in Christ's love. It was supported with scripture. It showed how Christ's love transcends time and touches lives.

Part II: "COPE with Grief" course results

Class One: C – Connect with Community¹⁷⁵

Community is an important aspect in people's lives. It gives a sense of stability and a perception of family. It can act as a support system and a sounding board. Through community, the darkness and foreboding of grief can be lessened.

The first week of class focused on the formation of community. Using the book of Genesis as our springboard, we discussed how the Scriptures show God's desire for companionship and community. The language found in Genesis 1:23 expresses the importance that God places on relationships.¹⁷⁶ This became a catalyst for the sharing of

¹⁷⁵ See Appendix A.

¹⁷⁶ Genesis 1:23, NRSV: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

stories about loneliness and sadness. Even in the infancy stage of this community, a bond formed.

As the members shared and listened, hearts were touched. One person said, “This is the first time in a long time that I feel like someone understands how I feel. This group knows without me having to explain.” As we continued to talk about relationships – found within the scriptures, within our lives, and now within this group – there was an unscripted sigh which signaled that the participants were beginning to understanding the heaviness of grief can be lessened when we connect with community.

Class Two – Open our Hearts to God’s Word¹⁷⁷

In the Christian faith God’s Word, the Holy Bible, brings a message of comfort and hope, grace and peace, joy and love to individuals and the community at large. The Bible ascribes praise to God with one voice, calls God’s people to corporate worship, expresses the nature of God, and sets standards for living a godly life. The Bible introduces the Messiah and brings the promise of life eternal. The Bible’s message speaks to those who walk alone and those who journey together. The Bible is the Christian roadmap for living.

The second week of class focused on the impact of God’s Word. Though the participants were Christians, many had not turned to the Bible as a nurturing tool for their grief journey. Using God’s Word as our guide, we began our discussion about the healing found Jesus’ Beatitudes.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ See Appendix B.

¹⁷⁸ Matthew 5:1-12, NRSV.

It's not easy to accept the word "blessed" when it pertains to grief. Yet Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."¹⁷⁹ In our discussion about what it means to mourn and how we can be blessed on this journey, broken hearts were touched. One shared, "I have a special passage that I learned as a child. I find myself repeating it when I feel overwhelmed with sadness. I never thought about its power being from God. I can see a blessing in that."

Some spoke of the blessings that their loved ones had been – the lives, the care, the love they shared. One explained about a blessed situation at her worksite: "One of my co-workers just lost her mother. After last week's class, I realized how important it is to be present for someone. So I listened to her story. Now, in light of the Beatitudes, I can see the blessing that I shared with her."

As we read through the Beatitudes, the participants found themselves relating to the ordeals described. They were able to see and appreciate blessings even in the midst of their loss. They heard promise and hope in Jesus' words.

The scriptures promise that, as followers of Jesus, when we are drawn into the presence of Christ, we can experience the restorative love of God. In both personal and communal settings, the Beatitudes impart the grace of God in the midst of loss and grief.

Class Three – Place the Loss in the Appropriate Space¹⁸⁰

The journey of life offers both positive and negative experiences. Some impact us for a moment while others leave a permanent mark. When we face a significant loss it is momentous and yet it is only one of many important events in our lives. All events need to be

¹⁷⁹ Matthew 5:4, NRSV.

¹⁸⁰ See Appendix C.

kept in their proper places in a person's timeline. This allows us to live in the present while looking back on the past rather than being bound to the past.

The first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3 give a realistic perspective on the highs and lows of life. Things happen that cannot be explained away...they just are. There is no delineation between the desired and the undesired. What is important is that every event has its time and its season. Permanence is not part of life's chronological nature.

As participants thought back to their individual significant losses, we discussed some of the other positive and difficult events that they had experienced. I reminded them that grief has a tendency to 'snap us back' to its point of impact – that moment when our loss intersected with our life's timeline. This focal point is important and significant but there are dozens of other points are also important and significant.

Though the season of grief can be long and its tug is powerful, it is only one of many important events in life. One shared, "My tears have kept me from seeing the rest of my life. I know the tears may continue but I want to try to live within each of my seasons."

This newly developed community centered in Christ and grounded in scripture was in the process of accepting their losses. There was an unspoken sense that they desired to live with the losses while living fully with life. The promises within the Scriptures were real and personal. The season of that moment was one of restoration and healing.

Class Four – Embrace Christ and Experience Healing¹⁸¹

The final class drew strength from the previous three. It focused on embracing the presence of Christ and experiencing the healing found in Christ's love within the gathered community. The discussion centered on being able to claim Christ's love even in the midst of

¹⁸¹ See Appendix D.

the pain, the tears, and the grief. It was important to realize that the grief journey includes the claiming of renewal and the sensing of hope.

It may not be easy to appreciate the presence and nearness of Christ when we are grieving. Yet, through the promises of scripture and the words and actions of others, the Incarnation and the expression of Christ's love is real.

The Apostle Paul defines the vastness of the Lord's love in his epistle to the Ephesians.¹⁸² He says that Christ's love has breadth and length and height and depth. Imparted by the Spirit, it is the love of Christ that makes us spiritually alive.

We talked about how the resurrection power of the Lord creates the body of Christ and the community of faith. God's powerful love opens us to the indwelling of Jesus, the Incarnate Christ. Christ's love is the catalyst for the renewing and strengthening of our inner being.

As we wrestled with these thoughts, a peace seemed to permeate the group. It was as if the community was opening a place for the Incarnate Christ to reside. Even on the journey of grief, we can be filled with the fullness of God when we have Christ with us.

Part III – Ongoing Vision for this Project

We, as pastors and leaders of the Christian church, have the opportunity and the responsibility to lead hurting people into God's grace-filled embrace. Using a small group setting that focuses on the need for community, the power of God's Word, the value of locating the loss appropriately on the journey of life, and the importance of claiming Christ in the situation, the bereaved will begin to realize that they are not alone; that there are others who understand; that there are people who care; and most importantly, that God cares.

¹⁸² Ephesians 3:15-19, NRSV.

The gathered community becomes the hands and feet of Christ to one another. In sharing and in listening, in crying and in laughing, in stories and in silence, people are able to recognize and accept God's healing love. Through community, the Incarnate Christ imparts the fullness of His love which is able to soothe the wounds of loss and bring healing to the grieving. Restoration occurs and life moves on even as the grief continues. When grief is embraced as a part of life, as a "season" in which Christ's love is evident, the power of the Incarnation of Christ can be experienced.

Conclusion

The doorway to a journey with grief is through a loss. Entering into this journey of grief can be lonely, dark, and emotionally charged. Yet, when people who have experienced loss gather in a small group setting, community forms. In this community, stories can be shared and blessings can be realized. In this community, the Incarnate Christ is present and Christ's love is expressed. God's love permeates and heals the body, the mind, and the soul.

When the faithful community reads and studies the scriptures; when people begin to live for today instead of all the yesterdays gone by, when believers embrace Christ's love as expressed in the fullness of the Incarnate Christ, they experience God in their lives. God heals the wounds of loss and restores wholeness to those who grieve.

The relationship between my project and Reformed Christian Spirituality

The Bible is the inspired record of the revelation of God for all people. Reformed theology supports the Bible as most authoritative source for faith and practice. R. Bruce Bickel notes:

The historical Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone – affirms that God has an eternal plan to make known the mysteries of the gospel. It is an example of God’s merciful kindness to fallen humanity that He has willed that all of the knowledge we need for a relationship with Him, should be provided by Him.¹⁸³

To us who believe, God’s word breathes hope and peace, love and truth. It touches our souls and lifts our spirits. It unites us as God’s own and reveals God’s plan for us.

My project embraces the power of scripture. When the faithful community reads and studies the scriptures, when believers embrace Christ’s love as found in God’s word and expressed in the fullness of the Incarnate Christ, they experience God in their lives. The scriptures reveal the healing and restoring power of God. To those who grieve, God’s word offers healing for the wounds of loss and restoration in their lives.

¹⁸³ R. Bruce Bickel, preface *Sola Scriptura, the Protestant Position on the Bible*, by Joel R Beeke, et al. (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2009). Kindle e-book, locations 162, 163.

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, volume 1, The Daily Study Bible Series*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 93.

Appendix A

(This is a participant's worksheet. It gives thoughts, writings, and scripture passages for reflection. This worksheet is intended to be a guide for the Instructor.)

C O P E with GRIEF

Class 1 COPE: CONNECT with a COMMUNITY

James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

GROUP GUIDELINES:

(Guidelines can be altered to meet the needs of the group. Guidelines should be reviewed before each class.)

- 1. Members are free to share as much or as little about their loss as they choose.*
- 2. Information shared in the group is confidential.*
- 3. Respect the opinions and experiences of others.*
- 4. Members are encouraged to use “I” statements (“This is what I would do” rather than “This is what you should do.”)*
- 5. Advice is not given unless requested.*
- 6. Be careful not to compare yourself with others in the group. Each person's grief is unique and each journey important.*
- 7. Though there are many ways to cope with grief, this course will focus on “coping as a Christian” which embraces our religious beliefs and behaviors.¹⁸⁴*

OPENING PRAYER:

(The prayer should be prefaced with an assurance that the words may or may not be prayed as participant's own words.)

Dear Jesus,

I come tonight not knowing what to expect. I'm not sure I can share. I don't want to show my emotions. I'm not sure why I am here. Please help me to walk this journey of grief. Keep me calm and keep me safe. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO COURSE:

(Defines the 4 classes of the course)

Each week one letter of acronym **COPE** will guide our class:

C – (class 1) The heaviness of grief can be lessened when we **CONNECT** with **COMMUNITY** (*James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”*)

O – (class 2) It is helpful to **OPEN** our hearts to the healing found in God's Word (*Matthew 5:4 – “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*)

P – (class 3) We must live today by **PLACING** our loss in the appropriate space (*Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’”.*)

E – (class 4) When we **EMBRACE** Christ, we **EXPERIENCE** the healing found in Christ's love. (*John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*)

¹⁸⁴ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief, Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010, p. 107.

Together we will journey. We will share our stories and the emotions brought on by our significant loss; we will share our faith and the beliefs that instruct us. For some, this will be done verbally; for others it may be in silent participation. This is a time for you (individually and collectively) to sense moments of compassion and caring and a time to realize God’s grace and renewal as our Lord walks with us in our grief.

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS:

(This gives an opportunity for each member to claim their loss. Instructor should model how this is done.)

Tell us your name, and the “Readers Digest” version of your important loss.

THE JOURNEY OF GRIEF:

(This section introduces a synopsis of grief – what it is and what it is not.)

Happiness, excitement, beauty, laughter – these are words that generate a sense of joy and well-being. But life has both good and bad times. Some days are filled with laughter and sunshine and joy. Then there are days that beg for tears; moments that are blanketed with fear; hours that are lost in darkness.

You have had an important loss in your life and with that loss you entered into the grieving process. Since your loss, you have probably found ways to “cope” with an assortment of emotions. Yet, your grief remains; your grief goes deep.

In a couple of words, how would describe/define how you feel right now?

What have you done to help you cope with the impact of your loss?

What does happiness and contentment feel like since your loss?

Grief can be a roller-coaster ride. Some days you may want to surround yourself with people; other days you may find yourself wishing you were alone. Some days you find people who are willing to listen to your story; other days you may think that no one understands. You may sense that you are over-reacting and even a bit out of control. You aren’t sure which way to turn; you wonder what part God plays in this picture.

If you could just ‘get it off your chest,’ what would you say to God right now?

Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D, gives some points about grief:¹⁸⁵

1. Grief does not progress in predictable, orderly stages.

¹⁸⁵ Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D., *Understanding Your Grief, Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing for Your Heart*; Colorado; Companion Press, 2003; excerpts from *Touchstone 2*.

2. Grief is something to experience rather than overcome.
3. Showing emotion when grieving is not a sign of weakness.
4. Grief expressed is often grief diminished. Crying, hurting, feeling angry and depressed are parts of grief. It does NOT mean that our faith is weak.
5. Thinking and talking about your loss helps in your healing.
6. Sharing your pain won't make it disappear but it will make it more bearable.
7. Grief never goes away. It ebbs and flows and its sharpness will lessen over time.

Class 1

COPE: CONNECT with a COMMUNITY

James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

(The instructor should be ready to define relationships – what it means within the Godhead, what it means between God and humankind and what it means between people. How community helps in the grieving process should also be discussed)

God is relational. We, who are created in God's image, are to live in relationship with God and one another.

“God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’” Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

The book of Genesis shows ways in which God interacts with others. Relationships are important to God. Community is important.

How does community impact your grief journey?

Grief gives need for solitude and need for community. Jesus exemplifies this. He went up to the mountain by himself to pray (Matthew 14:23). He also said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:2)

As God is relational, we are relational. Using the support of others in our grieving process is a sign of strength, not weakness. By choosing to invite others into our journey, we embrace our healing.

*“Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”
Galatians 6:2 (NRSV)*

(Discussion/instruction about grief is in order. Giving time to share might be helpful.)

Remember, we cannot hide from grief; we cannot skip it; we cannot will grief away. Grief is not something to overcome; grief is something to experience. Our healing comes through our inner resources and our external support. We need to tap both.

What has been the most difficult part of this journey so far?

With whom have you spoken about your important loss?

One thing that you would want to say to this group (and may or may not do so) about this time in your life it is:

(Discuss the 3 points mentioned below.)

There are 3 helpful roles that a grief group fills:¹⁸⁶

1. It helps us embrace hope. The group sustains the presence of hope as we feel separated from those things that make life worth living.
2. It allows us to encounter the presence of loss. Connecting with others who are grieving helps us to tell our story. They provide a safe place for us to grieve. With this group we can ‘turn ourselves inside out’ and share the pain of our loss.
3. It brings forth a feeling of ‘companionship’ in our journey. Our suffering can be affirmed by those who understand. We are not led nor are we pushed. Rather, we walk together on the journey called grief. Within the group, we share the weight of each other’s pain.

(Reiterate the help that community can be when grieving.)

Jesus says: “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Matthew 18:19-20 (NRSV)

(Discern whether the answer to this question should be openly discussed)

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how would you rate your level of comfort in this group? ____ Why?

It’s not easy to feel blessed when there is sadness or pain or a sense of loss. Yet Jesus says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Matthew 5:3-4, 8 (NRSV)

What do you think it means to be “blessed”?

Have you experienced any blessings this evening? Yes No
How or how not?

¹⁸⁶ Alan D. Wolfelt, p. 126-127.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Jesus,

I came tonight not knowing what to expect. I wasn't sure I would share. I didn't want to show my emotions. I wasn't sure why I was here. But I made it through the first class with this group. Please continue to be with me on this journey of grief. I understand that I can't skip it or put it away so help me to embrace it and to heal. Lord, as I leave this place, go with me. Protect me. Abide in me. But most of all, love me.

Amen.

“I heal, in part, by allowing others to express their love for me. By choosing to invite others into my journey, I move toward health and healing. If I hide from others, I hide from healing.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Alan D. Wolfelt, p. 97.

Appendix B

(This is a participant's worksheet. It gives thoughts, writings, and scripture passages for reflection. This worksheet is intended to be a guide for the Instructor.)

C O P E with GRIEF

Class 2 COPE: Open our hearts to God's Word.

Matthew 5:4 – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

GROUP GUIDELINES:

(Guidelines can be altered to meet the needs of the group. Guidelines should be reviewed before each class.)

8. *Members are free to share as much or as little about their loss as they choose.*
9. *Information shared in the group is confidential.*
10. *Respect the opinions and experiences of others.*
11. *Members are encouraged to use "I" statements ("This is what I would do" rather than "This is what you should do.")*
12. *Advice is not given unless requested.*
13. *Be careful not to compare yourself with others in the group. Each person's grief is unique and each journey important.*
14. *Though there are many ways to cope with grief, this course will focus on "coping as a Christian" which embraces our religious beliefs and behaviors.¹⁸⁸*

OPENING PRAYER:

(The prayer should be prefaced with an assurance that the words may or may not be prayed as participant's own words.)

Dear Jesus,

My mind knows that you are with me but my heart is unsure. There are times that I don't know where You are. Help me to trust You, to lean on You for support with my journey of grief. I need help in opening my heart to Your Word and Your promises. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO COURSE:

(Defines the 4 classes of the course)

Each week one letter of acronym **COPE** will guide our class:

C – (class 1) The heaviness of grief can be lessened when we **CONNECT** with **COMMUNITY** (*James 5:16 – "Pray for one another, so that you may be healed."*)

O – (class 2) It is helpful to **OPEN** our hearts to the healing found in God's Word (*Matthew 5:4 – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*)

P – (class 3) We must live today by **PLACING** our loss in the appropriate space (*Hebrews 3:13 – "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'".*)

E – (class 4) When we **EMBRACE** Christ, we **EXPERIENCE** the healing found in Christ's love. (*John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*)

¹⁸⁸ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief, Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010, p. 107.

Together we will journey. We will share our stories and the emotions brought on by our significant loss; we will share our faith and the beliefs that instruct us. For some, this will be done verbally; for others it may be in silent participation. This is a time for you (individually and collectively) to sense moments of compassion and caring and a time to realize God's grace and renewal as our Lord walks with us in our grief.

PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS:

(This gives opportunity for review of last week's class. Instructor should model what is being asked.)

Share one way that last week's class helped you.

GRIEF and FAITH:

(This section introduces how grief can impact faith.)

As we struggle with the changes in our lives, we need to be reminded of the promises in Scripture:

1. The gift of eternal life. (John 3:16)
2. The assurance that we will be reunited with our loved one(s). (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)
3. The promise that God is always with us. (Matthew 28:20)
4. The certainty that God cares. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Do you believe that God loves you? Yes No
How does that make you feel?

Do think that God punishes people? Yes No
Why or why not?

Do you think God may be punishing you? Yes No
Why or why not?

Class 2

COPE: Open our hearts to God's Word.

Matthew 5:4 – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

(The instructor should be ready to explain the scriptures cited within the framework of grief. Personal testimony can be powerful.)

God is complex. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-caring, all-loving. The Old Testament gives examples of God's power...God as creator; God as deliverer; God as someone to trust. In the New Testament the emphasis shifts from God's power to God's love for God's people.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 (NRSV)

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” Romans 8:31-32 (NRSV)

When you read the above scripture passages what comes to mind?

Can you accept that this is written about you? Yes No
Why or why not?

The Beatitudes – read Matthew 5:1-12

(A discussion on what constitutes a blessing from God would be helpful. Personal stories may be shared.)

Jesus’ words offer healing and hope to those who hurt. “Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted,” He says.

What would a blessing from God look/feel like?

Have you experienced a “blessing” since your significant loss? Yes No
How does that make you feel?

What brings you comfort these days?

“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’” (John 8:31-32, NRSV)

(Discussion on the definition(s) of truth would be helpful.)

We often know the “truth” intellectually but it becomes difficult to know God’s truth in our hearts and innermost beings.

What is the “truth” God wants you to hear this evening?

Jesus said: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. Matthew 11:28-29 (NRSV)

(This part of the class becomes personal and can be emotional.)

Jesus says “Come to me.” What does that mean for you tonight?

What would you do if you could take a real “rest” from this journey of grief?

Jesus promises that, with Him, you’ll find rest for your soul? What do you think Jesus means by this?

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (NRSV)

You have faced hard times. What have you learned on this journey of grief that, as you come alongside someone else who is going through hard times, you can share with that person?

How does the thought of being able to help someone who is hurting (like you are) make you feel?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Jesus,

I know that I will still have times when I am lonely and sad but I know that You have not abandoned me. Tonight, reading and talking about Your Word has reminded me:

Help me to trust You, to lean on You for support, and to claim Your promises for me in my journey of grief. I am willing to open my heart to Your Word. Thank you for helping me to do so.

Lord, as I leave this place, go with me. Protect me. Abide in me. But most of all, love me. Amen.

“The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” Zephaniah 3:17 (NRSV)

Appendix C

(This is a participant's worksheet. It gives thoughts, writings, and scripture passages for reflection. This worksheet is intended to be a guide for the Instructor.)

C O P E with GRIEF

Class 3 COPE: PLACE our loss in the appropriate space

Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’”

GROUP GUIDELINES:

(Guidelines can be altered to meet the needs of the group. Guidelines should be reviewed before each class.)

15. Members are free to share as much or as little about their loss as they choose.
16. Information shared in the group is confidential.
17. Respect the opinions and experiences of others.
18. Members are encouraged to use “I” statements (“This is what I would do” rather than “This is what you should do.”)
19. Advice is not given unless requested.
20. Be careful not to compare yourself with others in the group. Each person's grief is unique and each journey important.
21. Though there are many ways to cope with grief, this course will focus on “coping as a Christian” which embraces our religious beliefs and behaviors.¹⁸⁹

OPENING PRAYER:

(The prayer should be prefaced with an assurance that the words may or may not be prayed as participant's own words.)

Dear Jesus,

It seems as if my loss has become part of my identity. How can I be both a griever and your child? Even now I'm afraid to let go of my loss because it is a significant point in my life. Please help me know what to do. In Your name I pray,
Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO COURSE:

(Defines the 4 classes of the course)

Each week one letter of acronym **COPE** will guide our class:

C – (class 1) The heaviness of grief can be lessened when we **CONNECT** with **COMMUNITY** (*James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”*)

O – (class 2) It is helpful to **OPEN** our hearts to the healing found in God's Word (*Matthew 5:4 – “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*)

P – (class 3) We must live today by **PLACING** our loss in the appropriate space (*Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’”.*)

¹⁸⁹ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief, Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010, p. 107.

E – (class 4) When we EMBRACE Christ, we EXPERIENCE the healing found in Christ’s love. (*John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*)

Together we will journey. We will share our stories and the emotions brought on by our significant loss; we will share our faith and the beliefs that instruct us. For some, this will be done verbally; for others it may be in silent participation. This is a time for you (individually and collectively) to sense moments of compassion and caring and a time to realize God’s grace and renewal as our Lord walks with us in our grief.

PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS:

(This gives opportunity for review of last week’s class. Instructor should model what is being asked.)

Is there a special scripture passage that resonated with you last week? Share one way that last week’s class impacted you.

GRIEF and TIME:

(An explanation about the difference between Kairos time and Kronos time might be helpful.)

“We cannot go around the pain that is the wilderness of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes shuffling along the less strenuous side paths, sometimes plowing directly into the dark corners.”¹⁹⁰

Grief takes time. It is a journey. It begins with our significant loss or, in some cases, with the anticipation of that loss. When did your grief journey begin?

How would you describe the journey so far?

1. Bumpy
2. Smooth
3. Lots of turns
4. Rather stagnant

(Time should be defined...what is “significant time,” “down time,” and “personal time”?)

In those first days after your loss, how/where/with whom did you spend significant time?

How do you spend “down” time now (time not committed to your daily routine)?

Do you take personal time for yourself? Yes No

If yes, what do you do? If no, why not?

¹⁹⁰ Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D., *Understanding Your Grief, Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing for Your Heart*; Colorado; Companion Press, 2003; p. 11.

Class 3

COPE: Place our loss in the appropriate space

Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today.’”

(The instructor should be ready to discuss timelines – God’s timeline and our personal time lines. It may be helpful to for instructor to add personal examples her/his timeline.)

Even God has a timeline! In Genesis we read about creation. Each day God designed something different. God took six days to complete God’s work and took time to rest on the seventh.

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” Genesis 2:1-3, (NRSV)

Every person’s journey on earth begins and ends the same – birth to death. As humans, we chart our course with points of interest, major events, and significant issues.

What is your most vivid memory (something significant – holiday, birthday, vacation, etc) prior to your important loss?

How were you feeling about life then?

Grief throws a kink into our life journey. Emotions are heightened; our thoughts are scattered; there are times that we feel weak and out of control.

(This discussion may trigger some emotions. Instructor should be aware of this.)

What was the first thing you thought or felt when you found out what happened?

The Apostle Paul said, “Jesus said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NRSV)

Maybe you are a person who reads the last chapter of a book first so that you know what’s going to happen (and maybe not!). Fortunately or unfortunately, we can’t do that with life.

We can't skip the tough times; we can't embellish the good ones. If we were to jump from our birth to our death, think of all the things we would miss: birthdays, holidays, friends, family, good times, tough times, living, and dying. Each moment in life is important to the whole story.

“Seasons of Time” – read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

The writer of Ecclesiastes carries a message we need to hear. Though we don't know the length of the season in which we are living, there is promise that every circumstance is temporary. Each situation is only for a “season.”

Sometimes our loss is so overwhelming, so impactful, and so devastating that we cannot see the big picture – we do not feel strong enough to move past the impact of our loss. On a scale of 1-10, where are you with regards to accepting your important loss? (1 is where it is unreal and 10 is where you have accepted what has happened and are moving on with life)

(Discussion on what seemed “normal” pre-loss, what may or may not seem normal now, and what the participants would like “normal” to be like in the future. There could be discussion on the temporary nature of grief in light of the longevity of the grief journey.)

When we grieve, our sense of time is warped. There is no longer a “normal” or “regular” in our daily routine. Some days seem like an eternity while others whiz by. We may be bone-weary tired or we may be full of energy; we may want to focus on listening to someone or something or we may want to talk and talk. We may want to be in a crowded mall or curled up alone on our bed. What we need to remember is that the world is still moving forward even if our world seems to be frozen in time. In the journey of grief, most things would fall under the category of “temporary.”

What is one thing about grief that you hope is temporary?

There will be times that your grief will seem to define who you are – it becomes your “temporary” identity. We need to claim our identity as a child of God – which is eternal:

“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..” John 1:12 (NRSV)

(Personal comments from instructor about his/her different hats would be appropriate.)

Each of us has an assortment of titles. As we grieve, we need to remember all the different “hats” that we wear...not just the one named “grief”. List some of your “hats”:

Grief has a tendency to ‘snap us back’ to its point of impact – that moment when our loss intersected with our life’s timeline. Yes, this point is important and significant. But there are dozens of other points that may be important and significant too.

Make a timeline of some of the important and significant points in your life:

Birth _____ Today

It's important to accept that life is a journey and that God loves us so much that God is taking the journey with us. Even though it is hard, we need to begin to accept the reality of our situation. Many parts of it are out of our control. BUT God is in control!

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” *1 Peter 5:7 (NRSV)*

There are many things on this journey that make us anxious. What do you wish you could cast aside?

Each day we are in a different place on our life's journey. Our important loss moves into yesterday yet remains with us today – because it is part of us. Our life changes daily but *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Hebrews 13:8 (NRSV)* Because Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever, Jesus was with us when our loss occurred and Jesus is with us now. Jesus said, *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:20 (NRSV)*

(Discussion about Jesus and the assurance that He is always with us may bring comfort to the grieving. It may also bring questions. Instructor should be ready for both.)

When you think about this, how does that make you feel?

In what area(s) would you like to find Jesus?

We cannot turn back the hands of time. What we can do is live our lives knowing that Jesus understand the impact of our loss because Jesus was there. And when we are ready to move on, Jesus is will be with us.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Jesus,

I know that my loss cannot be my identity. I must claim that I am yours. Help me to live with this loss, knowing that it is significant but that there are many other important point in my life too. Thank you for reminding me that you are with me always. Lord, as I leave this place, go with me. Protect me. Abide in me. But most of all, love me. Amen.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 14:27 (NRSV)

Appendix D

(This is a participant's worksheet. It gives thoughts, writings, and scripture passages for reflection. This worksheet is intended to be a guide for the Instructor.)

C O P E with GRIEF

Class 4 COPE: **EMBRACE** Christ and **EXPERIENCE** the healing in His love
James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

GROUP GUIDELINES:

(Guidelines can be altered to meet the needs of the group. Guidelines should be reviewed before each class.)

22. *Members are free to share as much or as little about their loss as they choose.*
23. *Information shared in the group is confidential.*
24. *Respect the opinions and experiences of others.*
25. *Members are encouraged to use “I” statements (“This is what I would do” rather than “This is what you should do.”)*
26. *Advice is not given unless requested.*
27. *Be careful not to compare yourself with others in the group. Each person's grief is unique and each journey important.*
28. *Though there are many ways to cope with grief, this course will focus on “coping as a Christian” which embraces our religious beliefs and behaviors.¹⁹¹*

OPENING PRAYER:

(The prayer should be prefaced with an assurance that the words may or may not be prayed as participant's own words.)

Dear Jesus,

I know I need You and I want You in my life. But I'm not sure how to recognize You; to claim You; to experience You. Through the power of your Spirit, help me to be open to You. In Your name I pray, Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO COURSE:

(Defines the 4 classes of the course)

Each week one letter of acronym **COPE** will guide our class:

C – (class 1) The heaviness of grief can be lessened when we **CONNECT** with **COMMUNITY** (*James 5:16 – “Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”*)

O – (class 2) It is helpful to **OPEN** our hearts to the healing found in God's Word (*Matthew 5:4 – “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*)

P – (class 3) We must live today by **PLACING** our loss in the appropriate space (*Hebrews 3:13 – “Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’.”*)

E – (class 4) When we **EMBRACE** Christ, we **EXPERIENCE** the healing found in Christ's love. (*John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*)

¹⁹¹ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief, Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010, p. 107.

Together we will journey. We will share our stories and the emotions brought on by our significant loss; we will share our faith and the beliefs that instruct us. For some, this will be done verbally; for others it may be in silent participation. This is a time for you (individually and collectively) to sense moments of compassion and caring and a time to realize God's grace and renewal as our Lord walks with us in our grief.

GRIEF and GOD

(Instructor needs to challenge the participants about what it means to be created by God.)

The psalmist says, *"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."* (139:14, NRSV)
What would it take for you to believe that YOU are wonderfully made?

Think about what happened when God created the earth; "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." *Genesis 1:31a NRSV*

Because YOU are God's creation, you are good! If God were to speak about you, what do you think God would say?

What would *you* say about yourself?

Class 4

COPE: EMBRACE the Incarnation of Christ and EXPERIENCE
the healing in His love.

John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.")

Recap of the classes:

(After each week's focus is discussed, it is appropriate to ask if there are questions or comments about that class.)

The first week of our course we gathered as a community. We brought our brokenness; our pain; our tears to the group. As we listened and as we shared, we realized the importance of being with like minds when it comes to our grief. *James 5:16 says: "Pray for one another, so that you may be healed."*

Week two we searched the Scriptures for words of comfort; words of healing; words of promise. Together we looked to the Lord for guidance and support as we journey with grief. *Matthew 5:4 says: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

Last week we talked about the past, the present, and the future. We discussed our own personal timelines and were challenged to place our loss in its appropriate place in time. We talked about the 'temporary' nature of grief. We realized the need to live in the present and not worry about the future even as we remember the past and our important loss. *Hebrews 3:13 says: "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'."*

Now our focus is on the presence of Christ in our midst. We will discuss the impact this group has on our ability to claim Christ's love in the midst of our pain, our tears, and our grief. This becomes our journey towards renewal and a sense of hope. *John 3:16* says: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

(The passage from Ephesians may need some explanation – especially about Paul's definition of the power and depth of Christ's love for us.)

The Apostle Paul writes: "I pray that, according to the riches of his [Christ's] glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." *Ephesians 3:16-19 (NRSV)*

Paul says that God's Spirit will strengthen our inner being. We just need to open the door and invited Christ in. What does your "door" look like right now?

- a. Closed tightly with locks and no key
- b. Easily opened
- c. Can be opened with some difficulty
- d. Already ajar
- e. Other _____

What would your invitation for Christ to "dwell in your heart" sound like:

- a. "Please come"
- b. "Not now – I'm not ready"
- c. "Maybe tomorrow"
- d. "I know you're already with me"
- e. Other _____

Sometimes we doubt our faith – unsure of what we believe or why we believe. As we journey with grief, it is important to reach out for support. We need companions that have experienced loss – friends, relatives, counselors, and pastors. We need the Lord, whose love brings the comfort that can heal our wounds.

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." Romans 5:1-2 (NRSV)

(A discussion on God's peace as compared to world peace would be helpful.)

It is difficult to envision having "peace with God" – especially when we feel troubled. The good news is that we don't do it on our own – it happens "through of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

We all are troubled in one way or another. What does your trouble feel like?

How do you think you could "share the glory of God"?

How would you define the “peace of God” as it pertains to your life right now?

(It would be wise for the instructor to give some direction as to what the Incarnation of Christ means. Questions may be generated by this section.)

The Incarnation of Christ

In the gift of our Savior, Jesus Christ, God’s mystery and God’s love intersect. God, the Divine, assumes human nature in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the Incarnation of Christ.

Remember the song: “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so....*”

Do you believe this? Yes or No

How has your understanding of this promise changed since your loss?

Sometimes it is tough to accept that God is present. It is even more difficult to claim God in the dark, lonely times. Yet, grace abounds. We must claim the Good News which is the Word made flesh,¹⁹² the Incarnate One, Jesus the Christ. Christ is “*the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.*”¹⁹³ It is through Christ that we receive grace and mercy. We are restored and made right with God. In Christ, God’s amazing love is realized.

During this time of grief, have you experienced God’s love? Yes or No

Explain:

Jesus says, “*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*”
(*Matthew 18:20*)

During this course, have you sensed the presence of the Lord? Yes or No

Explain:

Did gathering with “two or three” or more these past weeks help or hinder your personal relationship with Jesus? Help or Hinder

Explain:

¹⁹² John 12:48

¹⁹³ John 1:5

Do you think you have experienced Christ in this group? Yes or No
Explain:

If you could define/explain the impact that this group has had on your journey with grief, what would you say?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Dear Jesus,
I need You and I want You. I know that, even if I don't recognize You, You recognize me. You claim me as your child and are with me in good times and in the tough times. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, I experience You through others. That is your mystery; that is your promise.

Lord, as I leave this place, go with me. Protect me. Abide in me. But most of all, love me.
Amen.

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