February 16, 2014
TEXT: I Thessalonians 4:13-18
TITLE: Ritually Adrift – Good Grief, Good Funerals: Part 2

Someone you love is grieving. What should you do? You comfort them through actions, sometimes with words, that they might not grieve as one without hope. Someone you love is crying – a child, a friend, your partner or spouse. So you do what has always been done: you embrace them; you wipe away tears; you sit beside them quietly present. You give them the space to share whatever needs to be shared. Sometimes you will then be asked hard questions: Why did this happen? Where is he now; where is she now? Where is God in all this? Whatever you say in response will feel inadequate as it must, because the one beside you is grieving a person – someone solid, of flesh and blood – and you've only offered words – something made of air and emotions. But as you've spoken your words, you were near. You were right beside them – holding her hand, looking him in the eyes. So they were not alone – and that is a big part of what our faith teaches us about what to do in times of loss and grief.

Again: Someone you love is grieving. What should you do? You comfort them through actions, sometimes with words, that they might not grieve as one without hope. This was true for the apostle Paul, who loved the members of the little church in Thessaloniki. They were one of the first churches he established, and this letter is possibly the earliest Christian document we possess; likely the first of Paul's many letters, composed around A.D. 50 – less than 20 years after the death of Christ. Paul loved this little church, but they were grieving the death of some of their members. And they were confused, because a big part of Paul's message to them was that Christ was going to return soon. So what about those who had just died? If Christ came tomorrow, would they miss out on his promised redemption? Were they forever consigned to the grave even as Christ's kingdom was to be revealed on earth as it is in heaven?

When he wrote his letter, Paul was far away from the people of Thessaloniki. He couldn't hug them or wipe away their tears. He had to resort to words to comfort them. But what could he say? In coming up for a recipe for their grief, he would have to make something from scratch, drawing on the ingredients available to him. He had three things he could mix together for this church. First, Paul was a Pharisee, a Jewish scholar, so he would begin with the language of his Jewish faith – the apocalyptic language found in the Hebrew scriptures (like in the book of Daniel) about the climactic Day of the Lord. He would use language about earthly powers being overthrown and the heavens opening to reveal the power and glory of the Lord God Almighty. Second, Paul was a Roman citizen, so he would borrow images from what was associated with the Roman emperor – how when the emperor came into town, he was preceded by loud trumpet blasts, marching heralds and soldiers leading a procession of glory. Paul would first stir those two ingredients together. But then he would add in the good news about Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior.

Paul's message was simple: Jesus was raised from the dead, not as an isolated miracle but as the first expression of God's kingdom. As Christ had died and was resurrected, so too shall all who die in the Lord be resurrected in glory. And when the Lord comes again, the promise of resurrection will be honored for both the dead and the living. So Paul wrote down all these words – shared this spiritual recipe with the church in Thessaloniki and then ended with this admonition: "Encourage one another with these words." And so they did – and so should we.

Someone you love is grieving. What should you do? You comfort them through actions, sometimes with words, that they might not grieve as one without hope. Lots of people give advice about what to do when someone is grieving the death of a loved one. Columnist David Brooks recently wrote an essay about the art of being present when someone is grieving.[1] He advised being physically there for others - running errands or bringing soup, walking alongside this person as long as you can. He also stressed that we should not compare their grief to our experiences of grief, since every loss is unique and personal. And we shouldn't say "You'll get over it" or "It's all for the best" or even try to make sense out of what has happened. As Brooks put it, "theology is grounded in ultimate hope; it is not a formula book to explain away each individual event."

And in the book The Good Funeral by Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch, from which I quoted in last Sunday's sermon, the authors emphasized that people should be allowed to grieve at their own pace. Yes, it is possible to fixate and lose one's self-identity in unhealthy grieving, but the critical fact to remember is that there is no single timetable for grief. It is wrong to interpret Kübler-Ross' categories of grief as a roadmap strictly to be followed after a death has occurred. Grief is a complex, powerful thing – a primal thing that often hits us quite hard. And in truth, the only way out of it is through it. Avoiding it, denying it, distracting ourselves from it in the end only makes things worse.

As I mentioned last week, grief work is not so much a "brain thing" as it is a "body thing." Finding a way to use our big muscles - our arms to embrace, our legs to get up and help out, our shoulders as something for others to lean on – that's a big part of how we faithfully grieve with others. It is how we literally flesh out Paul's words, when he tells us to "encourage one another" in our times of grief.

Remember how Paul as an early Christian writer had to create a recipe from scratch about how to comfort people faithfully in times of grief? How he used larger than life images from his own Jewish and Roman traditions to try and put in words that powerful promise of the risen Christ, who assures us that he will be in relationship with us whether we live or whether we die? I need also to say that some have taken Paul's words the wrong way. His dramatic image of heavenly trumpets and people being caught up in the clouds has, for evangelicals and others, been concretized as a literal "rapture" – a literal event like plane departures from Pittsburgh airport. Yet the word "rapture" never appears in the bible, and this idea of people being swept up to heaven and leaving their cars

without drivers is an unbiblical doctrine and fairly recent creation by American fundamentalists in the last century. Sadly, it has distracted from the truly powerful biblical truth that Paul is trying to describe in this passage.

Paul's gospel good news is this: History by itself cannot present anything that is ultimately and universally new.[2] Our earthly saga involves birth, life, and death in that order, with servings of pain and suffering as well as times of laughter and creativity mixed in to spice up the stew of life. But that's it. As it says in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun; there is a time to be born and a time to die;" so on and so forth. However, hear again what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "We do not want you to grieve as one's who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died...so we will be with the Lord forever." This is something not based on the old ways of history, but the new ways of God. This is not dependent on what is possible, but rather something that, by God's grace, is humanly impossible yet involves a new reality for all life. This new future changes everything – for the kingdom of God now breaks into, disorders, and challenges all our present ways of living. It brings judgment upon our old patterns of sin, suffering and injustice, and says this cannot, will not, last forever. And it offers a promise of real life, eternal life, since death does not have the final word any longer, now that Christ has spoken, acted, and been revealed.

That is what Paul is trying to communicate. His message is not a melodrama about the Rapture and cars left driverless on the highways. His letter is part of the real bible story of how God in Christ brings new life to all creation so that we might be together with Christ – alive – whole - free at last! And so to Paul's recipe of Jewish apocalyptic metaphors, Roman imperial processions, and the good news of Christ's promise being true even for the dead, we add in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with their images of a heavenly banquet, a communion table for all people, a mansion in which there are many rooms where Christ goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us, even as the Spirit of Christ – the kingdom of God that is in our midst – brings us hope, joy and new life right here and now.

So I'll say it once more. Someone you love is grieving. What should you do? You comfort them through actions, sometimes with words – like the words of Paul, the words of the gospel, the promise of Christ who says "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Why? So that they might not grieve as one without hope. And that will be enough.

AMEN

[1] David Brooks, “The Art of Presence,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2014.

[2] Cf. Feasting on the Word, I Thessalonians 4:13-18 – Year A: Proper 27 (Sunday between November 6 & November 12 inclusive); Jennifer McBride *Theological Perspective* and her references to the work of Jürgen Moltmann.