

Grief Must Be Witnessed
Service of Remembrance
December 13, 2020
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My grandmother, Bertha, died when I was a freshman in college. We used to go visit our grandparents during summer vacation. They lived on a farm near Clear Lake, Iowa. My grandmother struggled with rheumatoid arthritis for years. Her hands were often curled up in a ball. Morning after morning she'd cook up a big pot of oatmeal and hold her hands over the steam. Five, ten, fifteen minutes – she worked her hands until they finally loosed up and she was ready for the day.

After she died, we went to the farm to prepare for the funeral. I'll never forget walking into the kitchen. There was the largest assortment of pies I'd ever seen – 18 of them. I was a teenager and regularly hungry. I counted ever last one of them: apple, pumpkin, cherry, lemon meringue. Yum!

As a young adult, I was greatly impressed by the rich variety. I got to eat more pie than I'd ever eaten in my life. But as I've gotten older, I've come to view those pies as something more, specifically as a testimony to the way we used to gather. When somebody died, things came to a stop for three or four days. Friends and neighbors came by to pay their respects. Often it involved food and eventually a funeral. And the grief process would begin.

The world has changed a lot since then. Families are often more spread out. Cremation allows greater flexibility as to when and where we can gather. A funeral or memorial service or celebration of life is regularly put off till later, to a more convenient time, which may or may not ever get here. Sometimes there's no funeral at all. More often than not, it seems, we barely get a chance to say goodbye to a loved one before life rushes on and the world gets back to normal again.

In the midst of changing patterns, I think grief has become a more lonely experience. Add the isolation of COVID and need to keep our distance, and it often feels like we're on our own. The sad thing is: our sense of loss is every bit as real and painful as before. A loved one has died. We need to be together. We need to share our sorrows. And yet it's getting harder and harder to do so.

Each of us will grieve in his or her own way, of course. But there's something all of us have in common: we need our grief to be witnessed. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, once said: "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." I like the sound of that, hard as it can be these days. Maybe

the neighbors don't bring pie anymore, but hopefully they call or text, and ask how you're doing. And hopefully when they ask, they're listening with their full attention, acknowledging the magnitude of your loss, and not trying to point out some sort of silver lining. You know what I mean. Well-meaning folks often feel a need to put death in perspective, so they say things *such as: everything happens for a reason, time heals all wounds, your loved one is finally at peace.*

On any given day, you may or may not find these silver linings helpful, but people continue to say them, I suppose, because death makes them anxious and they're trying their best to bear witness to your loss. Someone is missing. Things have changed. They don't want to forget that loved one. Deep down, people really do want to know how you're doing.

There's a practice among the indigenous tribes in Australia. The night someone dies, everyone in the village moves a piece of furniture or something else into the yard of the deceased. The next day, when the bereaved family wakes up and looks outside, they see that *everything has changed* since their loved one died—and not just for themselves but for the entire village. In doing this, they are bearing witness to the grief. They are showing in a tangible way that someone's death matters.

I long for the day when our pandemic is over and we can be back together again. We're not sure what exactly that will mean, but perhaps we've been learning how hard it is to navigate life and death on our own. In a busy, fast-paced world, we're agonizingly aware of how much we need each other. Grief unites us. It's a universal experience. It's meant to be witnessed.

This might sound gloomy, but I believe that the prospect of death, its inevitability, brings meaning to our lives. In Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, Emily is a young woman who dies in childbirth. She's allowed to return to her life for just one day. She wants it to be a milestone day of some sort, maybe her wedding day. But one of the other dead counsels her to choose "the least important day in your life. It will be important enough." Emily chooses her twelfth birthday, an ordinary day in her completely ordinary small town with her totally ordinary family—except that when she returns to it from the dead, she soon realizes that all of it was extraordinary. Overwhelmed by how beautiful even the most unremarkable of days on earth is, Emily laments, "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another....I didn't realize it. So, all that was going on and I never noticed."

Emily's awareness of what she lost is so excruciating that she chooses to go back to the grave even before the day is done. Before she leaves, she takes one last look: "Goodbye, world. Goodbye, Grover's Corners. Goodbye, Mama and Papa. And Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And newly-ironed dresses and hot baths. And sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're

too wonderful for anybody to realize you!” As Emily is leaving, she turns to the stage manager and asks him if anybody ever does realize it while they’re still alive. And he says, “No....the saints and poets, maybe....”

Friends, we do our best to realize it, don’t we, but it all goes by so fast, and then it’s over. And our hearts feel like breaking. “Come to me,” Jesus says, “and I will give you rest.” We need that rest. In the loneliness and isolation we feel, we need the assurance that someone is witnessing our grief. Hopefully it’s a friend or two, or a family member or two, but there’s one more besides. Jesus knows what you’re feeling this day. He knows your pain. He knows the burden of your heart.

In the season of Advent, we claim that Jesus comes to our world, to you and to me, in order to bring healing and hope. And as he does – in becoming one of us – he makes us more fully human. What that means is that we don’t have to pretend to be something we are not. In the midst of the bright lights and tinsel, Jesus doesn’t expect us to plant a fake smile on our faces. He doesn’t ask us to act like everything is fine. No, he expects us to grieve, that is part of being human. Indeed, to grieve for someone is to pay them the ultimate compliment. It’s to ascribe meaning and significance to their life. As we remember our loved ones this day, Jesus asks only that we bring our burdens to him, so he can wrap his arms of love around us and give us comfort.

My friends, if the manager says anything to us, it’s this: No place is so lowly and earthbound that holiness cannot be present there. No hope is so lost that it cannot be restored. No wound is so deep that it cannot be healed. And if we listen closely, beyond our sadness and tears, we may be able to hear a word from on high: “I was born for you. I am with you now. I witness your grief. I come to heal hearts that are broken and give you peace.” Amen.