

**Perplexed, But Not in Despair**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
October 15, 2023 PM Sermon  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
2 Corinthians 4:7-12

So here we are again remembering our losses. We do it every year in the early fall; we gather together and remember the people we love who are gone from this earthly life. Why do we keep doing this? Is it really necessary for us to do this year after year after year?

I don't know if it's necessary, but it's good. And it's close to necessary, because grief and loss don't just stop. We do this every year because grief returns to us every year. Long after the people we love are gone, grief sneaks up on us, its cold shadow falls across our lives, and once again, we find ourselves in tears.

I've noticed that grief returns to us in two kinds of situations. Sometimes it happens right after we've really enjoyed something. Maybe we saw something really funny on the internet, or we saw a really great movie that made us laugh, or we read a book that just drew us in, and we find ourselves thinking "Man, that was great!" Then just for a second we have the urge to share it with the person who's gone from your life. Almost like you're ready to pick up the phone, or send an email. You have that urge because they were a person who laughed with you, a person with whom you shared life's joys, and now that they're gone. And so out of that moment of joy and laughter comes a wave of sadness. One minute you're laughing; the next minute, you're wiping away tears.

Grief also sneaks up on us when we need help. The people we love inevitably people whose gifts and talents we leaned on. And so maybe we're in the middle of doing our taxes, or fixing our boat engine, or when we're in the middle of cooking that old family recipe, and we find ourselves stuck or uncertain. We can't quite remember what to do and we think "Dad would have known what to do with this engine." or "What was it that Mom used to put in the soup? I wish I could call her." And then here comes grief. So grief keeps coming at us, year after year month after month, and that's why we come to this place and meet our grief with the hope of the gospel and we do it over and over again.

As we face our grief tonight I was thinking about the different ways that death affects us. One of the ways that death makes itself miserable in our life is through perplexity, that very descriptive word that comes from our passage. Death and loss are often perplexing. Why did that person have to die? Why did that person have to die now? There's no logic to it. Why are there some people who are praying to be released from this life and have been praying for that for years, while others are taken suddenly when they're completely needed? Why are so many of the best and most needed people the ones that show up in the obituaries? We've all asked these questions, right? They are...perplexing.

Most perplexing of all are the deaths of children. Years ago I read an essay in a collection of essays called Best American Essays. I think it was way back around 2010. I remember that the collection was edited by David Brooks. The essay I remember was written by a young woman who worked with children at the MD Anderson Cancer center in Houston. Her name was Miah Arnold. She was a writer, and she worked with the children by doing writing exercises and imaginative exercises that help them cope with their cancer. She would get them to express themselves through their writing. It was helpful for the kids and it formed a strong bond between her and these sick children.

Which is what made it so hard. She would work with these children for months, and sometimes years. She would learn to love these children. But then, by her account, 2/3 of these children she worked with ended up dying. She introduces you to some of them in the essay. Khalil, a 12-year-old with a lopsided gait and eyes the size of pool balls, whose personality can fill the room. Amira, a sweet 9-year-old girl who loves pink and Disney princesses. Michael, a tiny African-American boy with a shy smile. Even though these children have cancer they're full of life. And over and over she gets attached to them, she falls in love with them, and then they are cut down. Ms. Arnold writes that it doesn't seem to make sense who dies and who survives. Sometimes the kids you think who are going to make it for sure are the ones who die and sometimes the ones you sure won't make it somehow pull through. There seems to be no rhyme or reason. It's perplexing.

And perhaps it was this lack of sense that made her stop telling people what she did. When she first started working at MD Anderson she would tell people her work, and she found that it was a conversation stopper. People didn't know what to say in the face of that kind of pain and that kind of loss. They would get pained looks on their faces and mumble things. It was awkward. They were perplexed too. What do you say in the face of that kind of loss?

Well, what do we say? I remember reading that essay and wondering, "What would I say to Miah if she told me about all those children who died and she asked me, where is Jesus for those children?" Where is Jesus in the children's cancer ward at the MD Anderson Hospital? I don't have an answer for the first part of Miah's question. I don't know why these children have to die. I suppose that, from a general theological perspective, I know why suffering enters into the world, but I don't know why that individual child had to die. Why Khalil had to die. Why Amira had to die. Why Bryan had to die. I have no explanation.

But I think I can answer the question about where Jesus is in the MD Anderson Hospital. When it comes to these sick kids and when it comes to the sickness of the people we love, what I want and what we all want is for Jesus to come into the children's ward of the MD Anderson Children's Hospital and wave his hand over each and every one of these children and make the cancer go away. We want Jesus to go from room to room healing these children so that they can leap out of bed and follow him joyfully down the hall as he goes on his healing spree. But that's not what Jesus did when he came to this world. Jesus comes and shares our sickness, our pain and ultimately our death. In effect, when Jesus comes to this world, He climbs into the bed with each one of these children, and takes on their sickness, and all of their fear, and all of the fear of their parents, and all of the grief and sorrow of the people who love them. He takes it all into himself, and he dies. That's our story. That's the story in this book of what he does.

Or at least it's the beginning of the story. After sharing every ounce of this grief and this pain and the sickness, 3 days later, in an act that it is perplexing in a completely different way, Jesus rises from the dead, and he punches a hole in death's power, and he creates a wild hope for all those children in this hospital and for all of us who have ever been stung by death in a way that left us perplexed.

If you are feeling some of the perplexity and sadness of death tonight, it is this wild good news of his resurrection that I share with you again tonight. I can't explain the loss of the person you love, but I can say Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. I can't explain your loss but I can offer you the wild hope of the gospel so that you can walk through this world perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.

When our grief comes to us, we return to the resurrection. We do it again and again and again. We do it at this service, we do it at Easter, we do it in our prayers, we do it in the meditations of our hearts. And whenever we return to the cross, we don't just comfort ourselves, we strike a blow against death. We light a small candle of hope and beat back the darkness. When we meet grief and perplexity with the hope of the gospel that, death and grief start to lose their power, they start to shake a little bit, and they begin to give way to the eternal life which is ours in Jesus, a life which will one day fill the earth. ©Rev. Peter Jonker