

“Receiving Rough News”

Some years ago, my wife, Marcy, was on the phone in the kitchen when I walked into the room. Our son was there as well as he had just arrived for the weekend to celebrate Father's Day. Right away I sensed something very serious was going on as I looked at their shocked faces.

“Who's on the phone?” I asked. It turned out to be an old friend from California, and my son said, “It doesn't sound too good, Mom's really upset.”

The “Rough News” turned out to be the death of our friend's wife in a scuba diving accident. She had been our good friend as well, and one of the attendants at our son's birth.

Here was a dear friend, lost and gone, the body never recovered at sea in extremely deep water. We all felt devastated and heartbroken!

In the Old Testament, Second Samuel tells us about the moment that David receives the “Rough News” of King Saul's death and defeat in a battle with the Philistines. Saul had been killed along with his three sons- including Jonathan, David's closest friend. What occurs in today's scripture is the deepest expressions of lament and sorrow. David grieves and moans in the depth of his pain and loss. He expresses anger about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. And in his anguish and grief he cries out that those who have died should never, ever be forgotten!

Centuries later, by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus too, faces deathly situations and great suffering. While speaking with Jarius about his dying daughter,

Jesus's robe is touched by a gravely ill woman who has suffered hemorrhages for 12 years. She is losing blood, losing life, and losing hope as she reaches out to Jesus – seemingly her last chance for healing. Immediately her bleeding ceases and her healing begins.

Next we hear of Jesus going off with Jarius and four of his closest disciples. Jesus enters Jarius' home, hears the “Rough News” that the daughter has already died, but Jesus then, miraculously, raises the 12 year old girl from her deathbed, as it says, to “walk” into a healthy new life.

The theme of receiving and then coping with “Rough News” hits close to home for all of us at various junctures of our lives.

Today in this church family, and in our extended families as well as among our friends, people are clinging to life, battling illnesses or injuries, some perhaps at the edge of death, and others maybe raising a prayer and a loving lament of grief at the graves of their beloveds, now gone.

I know of the “Rough News” that this congregations received with the cancer diagnosis of Ann Mauze, and we hope and pray that she will find healing for her illness back in the United States where she and her husband, George, have gone for her treatments. George was my first contact with the Community Church of San Miguel and I have been praying that they will soon receive the “Good News” that Ann's treatments will bring the healing of her cancer that she needs. I myself am a cancer survivor, now of 10 years.

Each and every case of “Rough News” takes its own course and each requires faith and trust in God to help us cope. Whether that means coping

with death as it did for King David, or eventually finding healing as it did in these two stories involving Jesus. Reality often shows us that although occasional healing miracles may take place, as they did for the woman stricken with hemorrhages, and the young daughter of Jarius brought back to life, it seems that all too often “Rough News” ends in tragedy, or even death. Such are the circumstances that my extended family has been coping with recently.

On January 16 of this year, I got a phone call from my youngest brother that was extremely “Rough News!” His son and daughter-in-law were expecting their first child in a matter of days, but unexpectedly, and suddenly, the baby had died in the womb. No heartbeat could be found. There had been complications with the mother's blood pressure as well and she needed to be stabilized to be able to deliver the lifeless baby.

After several days of medical attention she seemed ready to deliver and begin the healing process necessary after the loss of the baby. But once again complications arose, and despite heroic measures, the mother too died. Within a matter of days, my nephew, at age 26, had lost his first child and then his beloved wife. There is probably no greater pain than that felt in tragic death and loss, no other depth of sadness, no other void – beyond telling, in missing the ones we love most in this world. Such is now the case for my nephew and all of our extended family.

Author Joan Didion chronicles the first year of living beyond the sudden death of her husband in her book entitled, *The Year of Magical Thinking.*” It follows Joan's journey through the first year without her

husband as she attempts to make sense of the weeks and then months that cut her loose as she says, "...of any fixed ideas...she ever had about death, about illness...about marriage and children, about her memory...about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself."

Didion goes on to write of grief's power to derange the mind and disturb the spirit. She notes that Sigmund Freud wrote of this power in a work titled "Mourning and Melancholia."

Didion writes of her "irrational" and "disordered" thinking during her grieving period which became "covert," or hidden. No one else noticed, she observed, because people in grief keep it "covered-up" as best they can in order to cope with everyday life. Nevertheless, she says, in this period her thinking was "irrational" and "disordered." For example, she could not bring herself to give away her husband's clothes. Why? Because in her disordered mind she still believed he would be coming back, and when he returned, what would he wear? You see, in the "Year of Magical Thinking," she started her journey in deep denial of death – very normal for nearly every person who experiences the death of a loved one. I think many of us can relate to Joan Didion's experience. So many of us find ourselves unable to speak our grief aloud, fearing that those around us will judge us a mentally unstable.

But as noted by Melanie Klein in her research and writing about mourning and its relationship to the manic-depressive state, I quote, "The mourner is in fact ill, but because the state of mind is common and seems so universal to us, we do not call grieving or mourning an illness..." Klein continues, "To put my conclusion more precisely: I should say that in

mourning the subject goes through a modified and transitory manic-depressive state and overcomes it.”

We see our friends and family members in mourning, or a state of grieving, and our expectation is that they will overcome it and that we too will overcome it when it is our turn. But what does that really mean? How will we overcome death? In speaking of the death of his mother, I read about a teenager who said, “I would go to her closet everyday hoping that, even as my memory of her was fading, I would be able to smell her perfume on the clothes she had last worn. I feared the day would come when I lost all sense of her presence.”

We pray for simple reassurance, and for sanity, in the face of immeasurable losses. Jesus, the grand master of human psychology and the healer of the human psyche, understood so completely all these dynamics surrounding our fears of death. Jesus assures us that God knows when we are suffering, sad, and grieving. God also understands when we, like Jarius or the unnamed woman with the hemorrhages, struggle and grasp for dear life! And God understands our need to cling to hope through Christ, our savior. We hope with eternal hope that the Christ Spirit can help us to overcome death and resurrect new life on our behalf. And Jesus knew the healing power of faith, that as we remember him and have faith in him – he really and truly remains alive and present in our lives. So down through the milleniums, Jesus consistently calls his disciples and appeals to us to remember his “risen spirit.” His appeal to us, when we take communion bread and then eat it; when we take the communion cup of blessing, is to

remember him, and in so doing we keep him alive and he keeps us alive. His promise is to remember us, to abide with us, to be present for us, in our joys and sorrows, our triumphs and our tragedies.

I am glad and thankful to be able to say that my nephew is taking this type of approach, or path, in his grieving. He has found solace from engaging life with a new purpose, and that purpose is to remember and share the life story of his wife and their baby, and the deep love that they shared together.

I want to share with you a post from his Facebook page: “Yesterday I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with the Journal Inquirer (a local newspaper), and today I will be meeting with a photographer to get some pictures of our home taken. This story will be featured on the front page edition on Saturday. Keep an eye out for this story as I continue to spread our message and tell of Crystal and my son's story to the world. A story of love and hope. Spread the message and always, #LetLoveGrow (three hearts)” This has become his healing mantra, repeated over and over in his posts. And through this time of mourning he has been squarely facing the reality of knowing it will be extremely rough to go through the grieving process.

Here is another quote from his Facebook Feed: “I woke up this morning with such anger, but in that split second I realized that we cannot be defined or consumed by our anger. Anger is such a negative emotion which holds many unpleasant consequences and once you let it in, it becomes who you are. I don't want to be angry or bitter. I want to spread the message of love

and positivity. Be good to one another, step back and realize that we are all on the same team. Spread the love and always #LetLoveGrow (three hearts).”

My nephew, in sharing his grieving in these ways has begun to find healing and his faith and positive attitude has become an inspiration for our family and far beyond into the community at large.

In closing, I'd like to share the words of a very spiritual song. Perhaps the reason that Simon and Garfunkle's song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” was so immensely popular was its imagery that could easily be interpreted to point towards God, or Christ, without doing so directly. Listen keenly to these words:

When you're weary, feeling small,

When tears are in your eyes,

I will dry them all.

I'm on your side. When times get rough, and friends just can't be found

Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down.

When you're down and out, when you're on the street.

When evening falls so hard, I will comfort you.

I will take your part.

When darkness comes and pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down.

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down.

Amen