

“Good Grief”

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Grief is good. It may not always feel good, but it is good. Grief is good because grieving always follows loving. Or more accurately, grieving is concurrent with loving. Grief doesn't exist apart from love. And as Christians our greatest commandment is to love God with our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. If we are loving, then we are doing good...to God...to our neighbor...and to ourselves.

It is when this love is broken - by any party (God, neighbor, or self) or by circumstance (like death) that grief is born(e). **BORN** in the sense of “coming to be” and **BORNE** in the sense of “having to carry it with us.” Because grief is something that is born in us and then it doesn't just go away quickly - we have to bear with it as we continue on with our everyday lives. And that can be such an isolating experience...the rest of the world is living their lives as if nothing has happened - and something HUGE has happened in your life. Sometimes it seems like the world should stop for our grief...but it never does...it just keeps going. So we have to be careful to not let life go on without grieving adequately. We have to express it...we have to get it out.

This is certainly the case for Jeremiah. And for Jeremiah's God (who is our God too). Remember that prophets are called to speak God's Word to God's people - no matter how hard the message is for the prophet to say - or how hard the message is for the people to hear. Simply put: a prophet's job is to be the mouthpiece of God. And so when we read these words in Jeremiah - we are simultaneously reading a lament from Jeremiah himself, but also from God.

This short passage from Jeremiah is a dynamic interchange between God, the people, and the prophet. It's not so much a dialogue, as it is the prophet verbalizing the attitudes of the people as well as God's response to those attitudes:

JEREMIAH: My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land:

PEOPLE: Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?

GOD: Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?

PEOPLE: The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

JEREMIAH: For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. I mourn and dismay has taken hold

of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.

When Jeremiah asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Are there no physicians in the land to heal you?” In this case, the answer is no. Gilead was a mountainous area across the Jordan River where a medicinal resin was conjured that people thought would cure many ills. God is upset about the self-sufficiency of Israel, the attitude that all their resources would be enough to fix any problem, heal any disease, make things right. Despite all that God has brought them through – Israel still seems to think it can do things on its own. And it can’t. And the idols they have decided to worship aren’t helping them at all. So what do they do? They turn, once again, back to God...but not to seek a relationship...they’re just seeking a “solution.”

You see, the Israelites are lamenting their *situation* - the destruction of Jerusalem because of the Babylonian invasions that will ultimately knock down the walls of Solomon’s Temple and send them into exile in Babylon. They are wondering why God is not helping them out.

But God is not lamenting their

situation. I’m sure that grieves him too...but God is not in the business of just sending “solutions” to folks. Here we see God lamenting the loss of relationship with the Israelites - God’s chosen people. We see God hurting because a people God chose to love has chosen not to return that love: “*Why are they turning away from me...the God they **know**? Why are they turning to these idols...which are foreign to them?*”

This is the heart of God’s heart-sickness. God is feeling like the partner in a relationship that is doing all the giving...but no receiving. I mean, God is the Creator that gave life to each of them. God adopted Israel before they were Israel, when they were a poor slave people in Egypt with no chance of being a people with a place...with land. This is the God who rescued them out of Pharaoh’s hand, gave them the Law to live by instead of another tyrant ruler, and delivered them into a land flowing with milk and honey to be their new home. How much more faithful could God be?

But once Israel *became* a nation like all the others around them, they wanted *to be* a nation like all those around them. Israel saw how other nations conducted their business and started modeling themselves after their neighbors rather than being a model for their neighbors of an alternative way to live in the world.

They even started worshiping the gods of their neighbors, as if to fit in, or as if their needs weren't already being met? Who knows. But this idolatry was nothing short of betrayal to the one true God who simply asked for a singular love and loyalty in return.¹

And God's response to such betrayal is grief. And this is a good response for God to have - because if God didn't feel this way, that would mean God didn't love God's people.

This is the way it works for us too you know. We would not grieve if we had not first loved. We would not grieve if nothing in our heart was broken...if nothing in our relationships were broken...if nothing in our world was broken. If the world God created inhabited God's Kingdom of peace, justice, mercy, and love - then "every tear would be wiped away," as the writer of Revelation tells us, and grief would be no more. But that's not the case.

Grief is an indicator that the world is not as it should be. And we cannot ignore that. We cannot not grieve...because to *not grieve* means we think everything is great as it is...that God's Kingdom has come already and that we are truly acting like God's

chosen and beloved children who are loving God, neighbor, and self without any problems. But we aren't there yet. The world is not as it should be.

Charlie Brown gets this, doesn't he? Charlie Brown gets that the world is not as it should be. He's always muttering "Good Grief..." or throwing his arms up with frustration and yelling "Good Grief!" I mean - in a perfect world for Charlie Brown - Lucy wouldn't yank the football out from under his feet...Snoopy wouldn't be such a high maintenance pet...Pig Pen would take a bath...Peppermint Patty would leave him alone...and the little red-haired girl would requite his love. But that's not the way it is for Charlie Brown - and so he says "Good Grief!" a lot.

In Charlie Brown's case, "Good Grief" is just an idiom...having nothing to do with the fact that grief is good...but rather used as an exclamation of dismay or surprise or annoyance or exasperation.

Interestingly though, the "good" in "good grief" is really just a euphemism for "God," did you know? It developed back in the day when taking the Lord's name in vain was a big deal. It's part of a subclass of euphemisms called "minced oaths" that are expressions that replace an unacceptable religious reference. Other examples are "Jiminy Cricket"

¹ Adapted from the sermon by George Mason, "American Idols," 19 Sept 2004, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX. Accessed on 18 Sept. 2010 at <http://www.wilshirebc.org/article235911.htm>.

for Jesus Christ, “for Pete’s sake” for St. Peter’s sake, and “Gadzooks” for God’s hooks (referring to the nails in Christ’s hands at his crucifixion).² People say “good grief” because they don’t want to blaspheme God.

But think about it - “Good Grief” really mean’s “**God grief.**” Which is quite profound...because even as an expression of exasperation and annoyance - there is a sense that when you say “good grief” you are saying that something is not right with the way the world should be...whether that’s as light-hearted as Charlie Brown getting the football yanked out from under him for the ump-teenth time or as frustrating as watching your wealth crash along with the stockmarket or as devastating as watching the images from natural disasters or as terrifying as learning of terrorist attacks that then provoke retaliative wars.

“God Grief” indeed. God is grieving our troubled world - and it is good for us to do the same.

Every time there is hate where love should be - every time there is injustice where justice should be - every time there is illness where health should be - every time there is deceit where honesty should be - every time there is worship of self where worship of God should be ---

² From <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/minced-oath.html> accessed on 18 Sept. 2010.

we should be grieving. Just like Jeremiah. Just like God. Because not to grieve is to ignore the fact that there is anything wrong. And we cannot ignore the state of our souls or the state of our world. Israel did this. Israel ignored God – favored instead the world’s way of doing things - and ended up in exile. (*I fear we are headed in the same direction...*)

The evangelical pastor, Chuck Swindoll has said of grief, “*We are healed only of grief only when we express it to the full.*”³ God’s full expression of grief about our world and our ways must be matched by *our full expression* of grief, sorrow, and confession to God about how our ways have created a world where worship of God is far behind worship of self and celebrity and wealth.

The good news is – God’s full expression of grief is always and forever equaled and even surpassed by God’s full expression of love, grace, and mercy for us. Jeremiah, though a powerful prophet in his time, is not the last word on God in the Bible. God did not suffer apart from us without finally coming to suffer with us and for us. We sang of this good news earlier – the good news that the African slaves in the American South came to sing: “There is a balm in

³ Martin H. Manser, ed., *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2001, pg 155.

Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul.”

But unlike what the Israelites thought - that balm is not a salve drawn from a balsam tree that cures from the outside in. It is a Savior drawn on a tree that cures from the inside out.⁴ Jesus is the true God offered to us as a sacrifice of love to bring back the joy at last to all of us. Jesus Christ is our “balm” that heals our sinsick souls.

This joy of healing can be known when we lean not on ourselves or our own understanding, but rather lean into the arms of a God who has been standing with arms wide open, waiting for us to fall back in love...to fall back in relationship...to fall back in worship and wonder with our Creator. When we do this – God will no longer grieve. And when God stops grieving, we can too. Now that is Good News.

Amen.

⁴ From George Mason’s sermon, *American Idol*. See footnote one.