

United Church of Christ, Kent, Ohio  
Sermon by the Rev. David Pattee, senior pastor  
March 29, 2009, Fifth Sunday of Lent

*Matters of the Heart*  
Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12: 20-33

Sometimes I fear we have so mythologized Jesus in his role as the Christ – miracle worker and messiah, blameless and without sin, gift of God for us and for our salvation – that we dismiss or discard this moment of heart-wrenching humanity: the trouble, he tells us, that he came to live with us, to live through, and to live beyond

"Now is my soul troubled. And what should I say? 'God, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. God, glorify your name."

"Now is my soul troubled..." Though the word is never used, there can be no mistaking that this is an expression of profound grief. The Son of God is in deep sorrow. Today, at the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus steps into the shadow of the cross; from this point forward there's no way around it, and his grief in this course echoes in the souls of all who would be his followers. We too are troubled, sorrowful, grieving the death of the pipedream that justice might be done by merely wishing away our ills and sorrows.

In her poem, *Parting*, Emily Dickinson writes, "My life closed twice before its close, and it remains to see if immortality unveil a third event to me. So huge, so hopeless to conceive as these that twice befell. Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell."

Again, as in John's Gospel, the word is never used – but we find here, nonetheless, a heart-wrenching expression of grief: deep sorrow, profound mourning that even the most courageous are at pains to confess.

Charlie Brown says "Good grief!" every once in a while when Lucy has done something particularly nasty, or Linus has said something especially odd. And it wasn't so long ago that one might have heard people say, "Don't give me any grief," which meant, I guess, "Don't bother me; don't get in my face." But other than these uses, the word "grief," the naming of deep sorrow and mourning does not come easily to our lips. It is mostly a cartoon word, just as death itself is so frequently a cartoon image: two-dimensional, something happening as a terrible abstract, over there, on the TV, in the newspapers, to someone else.

Here on this fifth Sunday of Lent as we are together with that very troubled soul of Jesus, marching to the cross, I want to explore with you the grief that echoes in the hidden depth of our souls: the sorrow that comes with inevitable parting, the mourning that goes with inescapable death.

C.S. Lewis, grieving for his beloved wife, wrote a small book, a tiny classic entitled, *A Grief Observed*. In its pages, Lewis let his mind and pen wander through his grief, with all its parts: its angers and doubts, its memories and guilts, its longing and its loving. He tried to sort it all out, to understand it, to make it mean something in the moment, even as it was happening, but he couldn't quite get a handle on it. Love turned to anger and then again to affection and

gratitude. God seemed real at moments, totally absent in others. Children and friends were there, all around, but not quite. Agony and tears felt both good and bad. He found his wife's dying, and his pain in the loss, both a disaster and an embarrassment.

At one point he wrote, "Grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting: just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything. I can't settle down. I yawn, I fidget, I smoke too much. Up till now I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness."

Surely many of us here have endured some grief such as this. Certainly all of us will, some day. But grief remains a terrible secret in our culture... a closely held and often denied truth. It is so foreign to our expectations, what we want from the world, what we think is important. When death intervenes in our lives, it always comes as a shock from beyond: beyond our control, beyond our capacity to rationalize, beyond our ability to make quick sense, even though it remains, along with taxes, one of the absolutely predictable things in this life from which there is no escape.

The secret of grief is an odd spiritual problem for people of faith, because we are supposed to believe in life, not death. We are supposed to believe in the resurrection of the dead. We are supposed to regard death as a liberation, a consummation, a confirmation of God's love and power. So what can grief possibly mean to us? Shouldn't we dismiss it as unreal? Isn't it unhealthy or self-indulgent? Isn't it fundamentally unfaithful, something which only unbelievers must go through?

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also... Now is my soul troubled."

Emily Dickinson was right: such partings are all we need of hell. To have life broken, brutalized, grabbed away from us, to have dreams or plans dashed to the ground, to have problems or feelings unexpressed and never to be resolved, to have so many things that needed to be said, or done, or enjoyed: all this ripped from us by a grief that will not be denied.

Parting is all we need of hell. And the worst of it, the worst of it, as C.S. Lewis so poignantly suggested, is: "Not that I am in danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not that there's no God after all, but that this is what God's really like."

The worst scandal of Christianity is also its deepest and best truth: God has put Jesus to grief and, in doing so, God has touched and filled our humanity with beauty and truth.

God has put Jesus to grief, and it is a grief all faithful people share. This is the awesome mystery and terrible glory of our faith: that there is a grief that is of God, that redemption of

God's people is born out of grief, revealed through grief, attained in grief. And what is this divine grief, this secret grief of God exposed to the world, this secret grief of God intertwined with grace?

It is the grief of a love beyond convenience and control, the grief of a love that will not withdraw or turn back. It is the grief of the cross: where the world parted with its very best; where the world parted with its illusions of youth and health and happiness; the cross where the world took its hope and hung it on a tree; where the world took its salvation and stripped it bare; where the world, the same world that had nodded its assent and roared its approval for all the good things, all the good ideas, all the good deeds that Jesus did and talked about and offered, where the same world that had nodded its assent nailed him on high.

The grief of the cross, the scandal of the cross is not that a kind, but befuddled old God let Jesus die. The scandal of the cross, the grief of the cross is that the living God who is love was in Christ enduring death, so all may see and know and believe that life is love and love never dies.

Jesus suffered the cross that we might live in love beyond death; but never in this world, never shall we live beyond grief. Not to grieve, not to take the time to grieve, not to make a place to grieve, not to grieve is to try to retain that innocence, that illusion, that human deception about our human power to make everything all right, to pretend it is all right, to just wish the worst away.

But everything is not all right. And every time death comes close to us, every time we lose or seem to lose someone we dearly love, every time we experience the smaller death of a relationship, or the death that is failure, or the death that is betrayal, or the death that is lies and conceit and hypocrisy, the death that is violence and ignorance and arrogance, every time death comes close to us or wells up inside of us, we are challenged to take time for our grief, to make space for our grief, to endure our grief, and to see through our grief to the life that is beyond this death. And our grieving can be our seeing, our grieving can be our believing, our grieving can be our longing even when youth and health and happiness fade like grass in the field.

Emily Dickinson was right, parting is all we need of hell. But she also said parting is all we know of heaven. Parting is all we know of heaven: that essence of our love that the dead take home to God, the essence of God's love that survives that cross of grief, and comes like the dawn, even as there are tears in our eyes.

I leave you with another affirmation of love by one who knew a grief that would not be denied. For the third of his *Naylor Sonnets*, Kenneth Boulding wrote:

Now I am veined by an eroding doubt,  
Insidious as decay, with poison rife.  
Is love indeed the end and law of life,  
When lush grimacing hates so quickly sprout?

I thought in ignorance I had cast out  
The sneaking devils of continuing strife,  
But as the cancer thwarts the surgeon's knife,  
So does revenge my sword of reason flout.  
    But though hate rises in enfolding flame  
    At each renewed oppression, soon it dies;  
    It sinks as quickly as we saw it rise,  
    While love's small constant light burns still the same.  
    Know this: though love is weak and hate is strong,  
    Yet hate is short, and love is very long.

Love is very long. Thanks be to God who makes it so through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.