

**Grieving Well**  
**Genesis 50:1-14**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**March 1, 2015**

*Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. <sup>2</sup>Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; <sup>3</sup>they spent forty days in doing this, for that is the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. <sup>4</sup>When the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph addressed the household of Pharaoh, "If now I have found favor with you, please speak to Pharaoh as follows: <sup>5</sup>My father made me swear an oath; he said, 'I am about to die. In the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore let me go up, so that I may bury my father; then I will return." <sup>6</sup>Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."*

*<sup>7</sup>So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, <sup>8</sup>as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household. Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. <sup>9</sup>Both chariots and charioteers went up with him. It was a very great company. <sup>10</sup>When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father seven days. <sup>11</sup>When the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning on the part of the Egyptians." Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan. <sup>12</sup>Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. <sup>13</sup>They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. <sup>14</sup>After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.*  
(NRSV)

**O**n November 11, 1971, my grandmother was killed in a traffic accident. At dusk that evening, she was driving a tractor with a wagon attached behind the tractor. A drunken man, traveling about 60 miles an hour in a zone marked for 40 miles an hour, crashed his car into the back of her wagon. The force of the collision sent the wagon up into the air and down on top of my grandmother. She died instantly.

My grandfather, who was driving a second tractor in front of her, slammed on the brakes when he heard the crash. He ran back to her, and with superhuman effort, pushed the 1700-pound wagon off her and cradled her lifeless body in his arms.

When my parents and I arrived at the farmhouse 2 hours later, grandpa was sitting in the living room on his La-Z-Boy recliner, with grandma's blood spattered on his bib overalls. Never before or since have I seen someone in such a paroxysm of grief. He was wailing and crying in a loud voice: "Pauline, Pauline, oh my Pauline! Why has this happened? What am I going to do without you? Oh God, Pauline!"

It seemed his grief had no end. When he first saw grandma in her coffin at the funeral home, he ran across the room, flung himself across her body, and wept loudly. A few days later at the funeral service and again at the graveside, his white handkerchief stayed in his hands more often than it stayed in his pocket.

The summer after the funeral, I hopped on my bicycle one Sunday afternoon and rode to visit grandpa at the farm. When I arrived he was suicidal. We in the family had known for months that grief surged through him in waves, and that he had talked about killing himself, but I was not prepared for what I saw. When I walked into the kitchen he was waving a 10-inch butcher knife in his right hand, telling me that he couldn't take it anymore and he was going to plunge the knife into his heart, then and there. One of my uncles arrived shortly after I did, and together we talked to grandpa calmly, soothingly, rationally, and after about 15 minutes we persuaded him to put the knife back into the kitchen drawer. He did not then or ever kill himself, but lived another 22 years, the grief ebbing into sadness and never quite leaving him.

**I**n the last 20-30 years, our culture has worked hard to control the sort of grief that my grandfather experienced. In various ways we have tried to manage and minimize the natural course of grief. One of our moves was to latch onto the so-called five stages of grief outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Never mind that when Kübler-Ross published her book entitled *On Death and Dying* in 1969, she was only using these five stages to describe the process that dying people themselves went through as they tried to reckon with their upcoming deaths. Her typology soon caught on with the public at large and others began to apply her five stages to the experience of grief. In an interview more than a decade later, Kübler-Ross caved in to the sweep of public opinion and said she thought maybe her stages of grief could apply to “divorce, [or] losing a job, a maid, a parakeet.”<sup>1</sup>

Even though careful researchers have charged that Kübler-Ross's five stages of dying were based more on anecdotal stories than quality evidence, the public at large

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 222.

seemed not to care. People hung on to Kübler-Ross's ideas as a way to control grief and turn it into a predictable, manageable process with nice, neat stages. "Now I'm leaving the denial stage and entering the anger stage" or "right now I'm in transition between bargaining and depression, but in a few weeks I hope to get to the acceptance stage so things go back to normal and I can get on with my life."

Friends, I hope we realize that grief cannot always be contained in five nice, neat, and predictable stages. Sometimes the real experience of grief skips over one of Kübler-Ross's stages, or the stages overlap or get turned around. More to the point, grief may not follow anything like the therapeutically manageable process that Kübler-Ross's stages imply. Grief can be unpredictable, wild, and undomesticated. Grief is unruly, perilous, and fraught with a tumble of emotions, which is exactly what happened to my grandfather.<sup>2</sup> And it can last for years.

A second way our culture has tried to control the wild expressions of grief is to have so-called "celebrations of life" instead of funerals. Rather than saying on Tuesday we're going to have a funeral, we say we're going to have a "celebration of life." The phrase suggests we won't be grieving too much at the service and we won't be shedding too many tears. Instead we'll say what a wonderful fellow uncle George was. We'll talk about his golf game and his collection of toy cars. We'll tell a few humorous stories about him, then send him off in style. The process won't be very painful at all. We'll do our best to be happy and to paper over whatever grief we feel. Then two months later when we meet aunt Tillie at Kroger's and find her chronically sad at losing the love of her life, we'll pointedly ask her whether it isn't about time to get over her grief and move on with her life. After all, aunt Tillie, it's been a whole two months now! How could you possibly still be sad?

I exaggerate here, but I think you understand what I'm trying to say. Grief will not be controlled by our stages and by our celebrations of life. Grief must do the work it needs to do. Let yourself cry, for pity's sake, even if it's three years after the funeral. Shake

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<sup>2</sup> Long and Lynch, 223.

your fists at the sky, if that helps. Listen to music of lament. Pray with the psalms of lament in the Bible. Talk to friends. If you want a counselor, then find a counselor.

**T**his brings us to Genesis 50, to the story of the death and burial of Jacob. This story gets very little attention in the modern church. It's not in the Revised Common Lectionary. The commentaries on my shelf don't say much about this text, as if our venerable professors of Old Testament aren't sure what to do with it. I can't recall ever hearing a sermon on this story, and in 28 years of preaching never used it for a sermon, until today.

Perhaps we don't know what to do with this story because it describes funeral and burial customs so different than our own. In contrast to our custom where the funeral and burial happen a few days after death, followed by the expectation that people will immediately "get on with their life," Joseph and his brothers go through a very long and deliberate ritual, full of overt expressions of grief. I notice 6 things.

1. Joseph freely expresses grief at his father's death. He does not hold back in any way. As soon as dad dies, he throws himself on his father's face, weeps, and kisses him.

2. The embalming process takes a full 40 days. To be sure, the ancient Egyptians used chemicals for embalming that took longer to work than chemicals we use today, but the point remains: during those 40 days Joseph and his brothers had lots of time for their grief, because the body was not yet buried.

3. "The Egyptians wept for him seventy days" (v. 3). In other words, Joseph's grief becomes the community's grief. Joseph and his brothers aren't alone in their weeping; they are accompanied by the members of the Egyptian court.

4. The procession to the grave is an important part of the story. Jacob dies in Egypt but is to be buried back up north in Canaan. That requires a funeral procession—a cortege—that may have lasted for several weeks, since Canaan was a long way off. In the words of verse 9, "it was a very great company" of people in the cortege.

5. Once this great company crosses the Jordan River, they pause to mourn for seven more days. So dramatic is their grief that even the neighbors, the Canaanites, remark at how unusual all this is (v. 11).

6. After months of mourning and ritualized grief by the community, Jacob's body is finally interred in a cave, and the whole entourage returns to Egypt.

**T**aken as a whole, Genesis 50 hints that grief takes a long time. It cannot be hurried. Moreover it suggests that intense public sorrow might be healthier than putting on a happy face and pretending all is right with the world.

I hope this congregation can be a place where we feel free to express our grief, even if it takes years. I hope we do not pray for emotional closure so much as we pray that all our loved ones will be caught up into the eternal care and mercy of God, who in the resurrection of Jesus shows that Death is not the end of life.