

“PLATITUDES THAT ARE TRUE” (Thoughts On Offering Consolation)

A Sermon Given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

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The past year has been a time of many deaths in our church community. And as always, many relatives of church members have died, including my own father.

I appreciate the kindness that many of you showed in response to that loss. It is one of the good things about us humans, that we reach out to each other in times of possible distress with caring and concern. Not that other species don't as well, or that we always do, but it is one good thing we often do that deserves to be honored. We sense that others may be in pain and we try to alleviate it as best we can.

“As best we can.” But the human inclination to offer sympathy is counterbalanced by a fear of doing it wrong, of saying words we mean to be comforting that only make things worse. It is hardly surprising that many people say nothing. In fact, it's more surprising that so many people do take pen in hand and write to say something like, “I'm so sorry about your loss.” And maybe add some fond memory about the person who died. Or else they say those things in person.

Such messages are almost always very appreciated. And while sometimes they are valued because the writers have done especially fine jobs of expressing their sympathy, or their high regard for the person who died, or both, a lot of comfort comes just from the assurance that one is being held in the thoughts of people, including others who may express themselves more simply, tersely, or even not very well, but who are every bit as sincere in their caring.

Just as all of us at a few sad times are recipients of that care, we are not infrequently in the position of wanting to express it. As I have already acknowledged, the thought of doing it badly does give a person pause. After all, we know it isn't true that anything said is better than silence, because most of us know how many oft-repeated words of attempted consolation would only upset us, even though we would know how well intentioned they were.

Charlie Matonti, a Catholic priest, notes that “PASTORAL CARE is the sort of helping activity we all engage in at one time or another. It occurs in funeral homes, on street corners, in shopping centers and the end of committee meetings. It can take the shape of a conversation, a dialogue, a word of consolation or advice. One of the most difficult moments we encounter is one of grief or loss: the loss of a parent, a spouse, a child, a job or one's health. What can we say at a moment like that?

“The Book of Job offers a compelling illustration of a man who lost everything and of three friends who came to console him. Job's great wealth had been wiped out, his home destroyed, his children lost and his health broken. For three days his friends sat with him in silence. Then they made a mistake; they offered some advice.

“It is always difficult to know what to say in the presence of great grief. In a small classic of a book Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that it is much easier to know what not to say (*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*). One good rule is to avoid saying anything critical of the grieving person: (‘Don't take it so hard. Try not to cry; you're upsetting the others.’)

“Another good rule: whatever minimizes the other's pain is wrong (‘It's all for the best. Things could be a lot worse. She's better off now’). Nor should we ask the person who is grieving to reject her feelings (‘We have no right to question God’). We should also avoid playing God's defense attorney. This role has at least two variations. 1) ‘God has his reasons.’ If a person is already upset with God for the pain they are suffering, we have just added guilt to his problems. If

God wants him to suffer, how can he pray to be free of pain? 2) ‘God is testing you.’ The idea here is that God sends pain to purify, to enable. This suggestion can rightly infuriate a person innocently suffering from a crippling disease.

“Job’s story, Kushner notes, is instructive. Job needed sympathy, compassion, comfort, people holding him, not scolding him. He needed friends to allow him to be angry and cry, not friends who urged him to patience. Job’s friends did two things right. They came and listened. When he was finished, they should have said:

“‘Yes, that was really awful!’”ⁱ

So simplicity is often a virtue, especially if you don’t know the grieving person well enough to know if your theological insight will be helpful. And sincerity has lessons to offer: what is it you really want to express? “I was saddened to hear that your mother died. My thoughts are with you.” And then maybe, “I remember meeting her when she came to visit a few years ago, and I was struck with how much she seemed to delight in your family. I can imagine her loss being hard for you all, and you have my deep sympathy.”

But don’t we want to reassure the person, offer a word of hope, recall an adage that puts things in a less somber context? I mean, after the millennia since Job, haven’t we humans come up with some observations, pithily put, that a person in difficult days would be glad to be reminded of? Aren’t there platitudes about grief that are true?

That possibility has echoed in my mind for years, and it appears in the textbook about preaching I co-authored a few years ago. There is a chapter on services that seek to heal. In it, the importance of knowing what the congregation is experiencing is stressed, just as it is critical for anyone who’s talking with a grieving person to pay attention to what that person is actually experiencing.

In the book, the other author noted that ministers need to listen to congregants’ feelings “to be able to preach to them in a warm, practical, and personal way that heals....

“As preachers who heal, we need to be in honest conversation with our parishioners; and if we offer platitudes at all, they must be platitudes that are true.”ⁱⁱ “Platitudes that are true” -- it is a phrase that catches the ear, because the word “platitude” has such negative connotations.

It calls to my mind the lyrics of a Linda Ronstadt song from years ago, not about grief over death but about unrequited love:

Love will abide,
Take things in stride.
Sounds like good advice,
But there’s no one at my side.
And time washes clean
Love’s wounds unseen.
That’s what someone told me
But I don’t know what it means.

And yet this textbook that has *my* name on it, too, says that in times of loss or hurt or pain, in trying to find words of healing, there are platitudes – trite remarks -- that are actually true and worth repeating. I have spent a fair amount of time of late wondering what those platitudes might be, the true ones, not just ones about death and loss or unrequited love, but about forgiveness, since Yom Kippur begins this evening, or about anything. And not just platitudes, but aphorisms, truisms, whatever things are commonly offered as comfort or guidance.

And my maddening conclusion is that most such statements are true ... sometimes. This is hardly surprising, since your typical saying has a saying that says its opposite. And that one’s also true ... sometimes. “Easy does it,” “No pain, no gain.” “There’s no place like home,” “Go west, young man.” “There’s no harm in trying,” “Better safe than sorry.”

Of course, none of those would be of much help after a major loss. So what would? There are some ideas that do seem to help oftentimes, and if they sound trite, it's okay.

In many a hard time, the truest thing is just that, "It's hard," and as trite as the observation may be, people are often comforted to have their reality acknowledged. "Yes," one says to Job, "that was really awful."

And sometimes, a loss *isn't* so hard for some people to take, and a compliment about the person who has died, with a smile of remembrance, may be just the trite but true thing to say.

The thing is, almost everything depends on the circumstances, on the relationships involved, on the timing. There are things I get to say in my role as minister, especially in the course of a memorial service or committal, that few others might. "When a loved one dies," I often say, "we may remember then the blessing we have received, and even rejoice that for so long our lives were deepened beyond the power of anything to destroy, for never did beauty touch the human heart without creating something eternal.

"And so let us bear our loss with patience. Since she meant so much to us for so many years, so ought we to cherish her memory, and make it a glad rather than a sorrowful one." I say those words often, and so I suppose they're commonplace to those who attend many memorial services here, but they are true, I believe, and I will say them again.

Still, they probably aren't ones you'll be saying or writing yourself. For one thing, you don't get to speak in the congregational "we." I can speak of *our* bearing *our* loss with patience. Yet some of the thoughts in the passage you well may express, albeit differently, in some situations. "I am so glad I knew him." "Thinking about her makes me smile." But it all depends on the circumstances, the relationships, the timing.

The key therefore is attentiveness, hoping to gain insight into the grieving or troubled person's feelings at that moment. It's being with the person and listening, not worrying about finding the wisest observation.

Which is hard to do when you're writing a card. I went to the drug store to read the sympathy cards you can buy there. Truth is, I was looking for platitudes of the sort that wouldn't appeal to most UUs. It seems to me that's what there used to be lots of, and there still are a few, though even those don't go as far as suggesting that it's all for the best or it's all part of God's great plan.

Instead, the cards seem to be offering some combination of these four sentiments: (1) I'm sorry about your loss, (2) It can really hurt to lose someone, (3) I hope your memories of the person who died are providing you some comfort, and (4) Know that I and others who care for you have you in our thoughts.

One or two of those thoughts, bought or written yourself, will be gratefully received by the grieving.

But what about time and how it heals? Shouldn't that platitude be offered? Time does heal, doesn't it? The pain of loss becomes less intense, one somehow learns to live with the loss, even to enjoy life again. While time may not wash clean love's wounds unseen, it helps the wounds heal into memory, however sad.

But I can not imagine the moment when anyone might say to a person in pain or grief, "Time heals all wounds," unless the remark were paired with a personal story, told between friends. "After my loss, I thought I would never be happy again, but at least for me it turned out that time did heal, just like they say."

Otherwise, it sounds too easy, too pat, too presumptuous. No one can know that for sure. There is reason for doubt. The poet John Berryman wrote,

I told a lie once in verse. I said
I said I said "the heart will mend,
Body will break and mend, the foam replace
For even the inconsolable his taken friend."

This is a lie. I had not been here then.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And yet, there is reason for hope, too, in time’s healing power, and you just have to know that everyone has heard the promise, they don’t need us to repeat it. But we can repeat it to ourselves. And so I quote Abraham Lincoln, from his address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society meeting in Milwaukee in 1859, “It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words. ‘And this, too, shall pass away.’ How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction.”^{iv}

Well, that ends my sermon, which turned out differently than I had imagined, and not very humorous. Nor did I get to forgiveness as I planned, Yom Kippur and all and the story about grudges. In Lincoln’s tale, the wise men say that in all times and situations, “this, too, shall pass away.” Oh, if only that were soon true of the grudges between nations and peoples, not to mention the ones in our own hearts. As Yom Kippur nears, let that be our prayer, for repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. Amen.

ⁱ Father Charlie Matonti, “Pastoral Care,” StColumbaC/home.html

ⁱⁱ Jane Rzepka and Ken Sawyer, *Thematic Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 108

ⁱⁱⁱ John Berryman in *Great Occasions*, Carl Seaburg (ed.) (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1984) 187-8

^{iv} Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the Wisconsin Agricultural Society, Milwaukee [September 30, 1859]”, in *Bartlett’s Quotations: Sixteenth Edition*, John Bartlett and Justin Kaplan (ed.) (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992) 448