Sunday, September 11, 1983
AFTER IT HAPPENS (NO. 3 IN A SERIES: HOW TO DEAL WITH DEATH)
Psalm 139:1-12; Matthew 5:1-11

A man whose wife had died said, “If someone whom I respected had sat me down after my wife died and said, ‘Now, Martin, bereavement is a wound. It’s like being very, very badly hurt. But you are healthy. You are strong. You will recover. But recovery will be slow. You will grieve, and that is painful. And your grief will have many stages, but all of them will be part of the healing. Little by little, you will be whole again. And you will be a stronger person. Just as a broken bone knits and becomes stronger than before, so will you.’”

He went on to say to me, “If that someone had said this, what would’ve happened? Knowing me, I suspect that I would have protested, ‘Oh, that’s very interesting. I’m sure you’re right. But it doesn’t apply to me.’ And I would’ve gone on to explain that mine was a very special case, indeed.”

But perhaps not. He said, “I like to think I would have had the sense to benefit from such wise counsel, that I would have asked, just as one asks the physician when told that surgery is necessary, ‘What will it entail? How long will it take? How much will it hurt? When will I be my joyful self again?’”

There are no pat and easy answers to such questions. They vary with each individual according to temperament, background, emotional and physical health, age, and a host of other conditions. But there is a pattern to grief, a pattern that is predictable. Studies in this country and in England have corroborated that there are phases or stages of grief and that phase follows phase as spring follows winter.

These studies also now show that grief is very stressful and that there is a clear link between stress and illness. And the death of a spouse brings more stress to an individual’s life than any other event. Dr. Thomas H. Holmes and his associates at the University of Washington School of Medicine developed a means by which they could objectively measure the amount of stress or emotional upset in a person’s life. They then designed a scale that assigned numerical values to stressful events. Totaling the numerical values of all the stressful events in a person’s life could indicate the amount of stress he or she was going through. At the top of the list, with a numerical value of 100, is “death of a spouse.”

Recent studies have also shown that in the grief process the human body’s immune system simply does not work as well as at other times. In other words, stress, particularly the stress that comes into our lives because of the death of a loved one, lowers our resistance to illness.

Let’s then look more closely at this process of grief, for the more we understand it, the better we will be able to come through it. Furthermore, by experiencing one’s grief and accepting it and going though it, one grows in warmth, in understanding, and in wisdom. Time after time, people have told me that, while their grief has been a bitter burden, it has also changed them and made them more aware of the importance of living each minute and each hour and each day to the utmost.

Knowing the stages and process of grief beforehand will not make one’s grief less intense, and will not lessen one’s misery, but it does give on hope. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

In a very helpful little book entitled, Good Grief, Granger Westberg writes, “We spend a good portion of our lives working diligently to acquire those things that make life rich and meaningful — friends, a husband or wife, children, a home, a job, material comforts, money, and security. What happens to us when we lose any of these persons or things which are so important to us?

“Quite naturally, we grieve over the loss of anything important. Sometimes, if the loss is great, the very foundations of our life are shaken, and we are thrown into deep despair.”

Westberg then goes on to point out that our religious faith has somethings to do with the way we handle our grief, but not in the way that some people think. Too many of us have the idea that a person with a strong faith does not grieve. But that’s no true. Our Christian faith has never said that a truly religious person does not experience grief. What it does say is that there are good ways and bad ways to grieve and that what an individual considers to be of most importance in life will definitely affect the way he or she grieves.

The death of a loved one may bring us into our deepest grief, but life is filled with other losses, as well, which can bring on grief. Moving away from close friends or having them move away from us can bring on grief. Losing a job; divorce; retirement; our children grow up and leave home; loss of health; loss of a home through fire, tornado, or other catastrophe; loss of a favorite pet — any of these events can cause grief. And how we handle some of the little griefs in life will in some measure tell us how we will probably handle the larger griefs when they come.

There are now a number of books outs which outline the various stages of grief, particularly the grief caused by the death of a loved on. I’m going to outline these major stages that most of us go through. Remember, these should be understood as the normal process through which most of us will go as we face up to our loss. But everyone does not go through all these stages, nor does an induvial necessarily go through them in this order, nor is it always possible to tell when we are moving from one phase to another.

1. The first stage of grief is merciful — a numbness that comes from shock. Westberg writes, “God has so made us that we can somehow bear pain and sorrow and even tragedy. However, when the sorrow is overwhelming, we are sometimes temporarily anesthetized in response to a tragic experience.”

“I felt numb and solid for one week,” said one young widow whose husband had died unexpectedly. “It was a blessing.”

Sometimes we see a sorrowing wife or husband a few days after the death of a loved one and find that he or she is almost as radiant as those who have come to offer their sympathy. Probably she is in a state of temporary anesthesia which is carrying her along until she is ready to move into the next stage of grief.

2. The next stage in grief can be called the stage of suffering, and it can include many smaller stages and emotions. In this stage, all kinds of questions intrude. How can you go on living? Your world is shattered. Why did she die? Why didn’t I die first? There are no easy answers, and even if your questions were answered, your pain would not be eased. Not all questions have answers.

You are in pain and suffering, and people try to console you. “I know just how you feel...” and you want to shout back, “No, you don’t! How could you possibly know what I am going through?” Someone reminds you that others have lived through it, and you are not concerned about others, but about how you are going to live through it.

Don’t be afraid to cry and express your suffering. You may find yourself crying at odd times and in strange places. But remember, grief is one of the most basic human emotions. It is very, very normal. There is no way to predict how you will feel. Each person mourns in a different way.

Remember, too, that crying is not a sign of weakness. The Bible shows that when calamities came to people of faith, both men and women, they often wept bitterly.

During this stage of suffering, you may last out in anger against your family or friends, or you may express your gratitude for their concern. You may be calm one moment and in turmoil the next.

Suffering is not only frightening, but erratic. At times you may experience such emotions as anger, panic, physical illness, guilt, depression, denial. You are not abnormal. There is no detour around bereavement. You may find yourself doing crazy things, like speaking of the one who has died in the present tense. The telephone rings, and for an instant you think it’s your beloved calling.

Anger is very often a strong emotion in this stage of suffering. You may find yourself thinking, “Look at my no-good neighbor! He’s in perfect health! Why didn’t he die? Why did this happen to my loved one, who was so wonderful? What kind of God would do this to me? It’s all so unfair.” You may even become annoyed at those who are connected with the event of death — the physician, nurse, funeral director, minister. You feel you are being punished and persecuted for a sin you did not commit.

And you may very well be angry with your loved one who has died — angry at him or her for leaving you. He is at peace, while you are left to deal with the problems of the world. You will also be angry with yourself. “Why was I not more caring? Why didn’t I get her to the doctor sooner?”

Anger is a part of the grief process. Gradually, as your pain subsides, so will your anger and suffering.

Another element in this stage of suffering may be panic. “What’s going to happen to me?” “Can I make it all alone?” You will feel alone, confused, helpless, and hopeless. Simple routing decisions become major problems.

In this stage of suffering, many people in grief also become physically ill. As I mentioned earlier, our body’s defense system is weakened because of our grief.

In your suffering, you may find that you no longer care how you look or dress. You have little self-esteem and feel unworthy and depressed. You find no pleasure in anything or anyone. You have lost interest, not only in yourself and those around you, but in life itself. This kind of depression is not weakness. It is a psychological necessity. It is party of the mournful work of saying “Goodbye” to your loved one.

3. The third main stage, again with many sub-stages as part of it, is that of recovery. You begin to accept your loss. In order to help yourself in your recovery, do not be afraid to express your emotions. Put your feelings into words: “I am angry.” “I am sad.” “I am hurt.” At the same time, do not be too hard on yourself. The depth of your sorrow diminished slowly and at times imperceptibly. It takes times, lots of time. Remember, too, that you will never become your “old self” again. When we go through any significant grief experience, we come out of it as different people.

And, just when you are making good progress forward, you may find yourself receiving a startling setback. It may happen on a holiday, birthday, or anniversary. This, too, is normal. It’s difficult to begin a new way of life without your loved one.

However, it is helpful to begin doing some routine tasks. You will find yourself making excuses for not doing what needs to be done, yet begin to do these simple tasks anyway. Then gradually hope will begin to come through. Accept some invitations to go out.

Do not be like the one woman who acted strangely ever since her musician husband died twenty years ago. She has kept his music studio just as he left it when he died. She has locked the keyboard of his piano and has allowed no one ever to enter the room. Each day she stands for a long time in the doorway with her memories. She has consistently refused to enter life again.

Knowing what we do now about the process of grief, it appears that at the time of her husband’s death, she was not helped to wrestle her way through to a new way of life. Apparently she had few or no friends who were willing to stay by her side during those difficult days, and, as a result, she had no one to encourage her to do her grieving in the normal way. She felt that her only friend was her dead husband, and she had to remain loyal to him. That was why she locked the keyboard of the piano. She wanted no one else ever to play that piano again, lest she be disloyal to the memory of the only person whose friendship she could trust. (This story is told by Granger Westberg in his book, Good Grief.)

Rabbi Joshua Liebman in his book, Peace of Mind, has a chapter on “Grief’s Slow Wisdom,” which describes this temptation not to return to usual activities again. Says Liebman, “The melody that the loved one played upon the piano of your life will never by played quite that way again, but we must not close the keyboard and allow the instrument to gather dust. We must seek out other artists of the spirit, new friends who gradually will help us to find the road to life again, who will walk that road with us.”

Through all the stages of grief, remember that God and God’s love are there with you.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. In each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand — one belonging to him and the other to God. When the last scene flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and noticed that many times along the path there was only one set of footprints in the sand. He also noticed that this happened during his lowest saddest times in his life. This really bothered him, so in his dream he questioned God. He said, “God, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why, when I needed you the most, you deserted me.” God replied, “My child, I would never desert you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

You will change, you will grow, and you will understand for the first time what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” The important words are “walk through.” You walk through and do not remain where you were. Amen.