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Soul Tending

Grief is a powerful emotion. It is often deeply and painfully felt, sometimes overwhelming not only the heart but also the body, mind, and soul. Grief may be so long-lasting and pervasive that it is destructive, totally debilitating the person experiencing it. Jesus knew grief. He experienced the death of persons to whom he felt close. He grieved over the Jews in Jerusalem and perhaps others who did not understand or would not accept God's intentions and God's love for them. Also, toward the end of his life, Jesus experienced grief over his own life, particularly what he was facing. How did he deal with his grief so that it did not consume him? Consider these three examples of how Jesus tended his heart by dealing with his grief.

Herod had John the Baptist beheaded as requested by the young girl who had danced for him at his party (Matthew 14:1-12). Although the text says that "the king was grieved" to keep his thoughtless promise to grant the girl's request, surely he did not truly grieve over this death. The real grief was borne by John the Baptist's disciples and others who loved him, including Jesus.

Jesus' mother, Mary, and John's mother, Elizabeth, were cousins and friends. We know that Mary visited Elizabeth while each was pregnant. Perhaps after the births of their sons, the women met and let their boys play together. When they were young men, Jesus and John met again. John the Baptist was already pursuing his call to preach repentance when Jesus came to him to be baptized. Jesus soon began his own ministry. Perhaps the two met after that. Several gospel texts suggest each was aware of the ministry of the other (e.g., Luke 7:18-34). When Jesus was told about John's death, surely he was deeply grieved. We read, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself " (Matthew 14:13). Jesus' first response to this terrible news was to escape from everyone to be alone. However, the crowds followed him.

Jesus responded to their needs, healing the sick and providing fish and bread for thousands of them to eat. A second time, however, he sent the disciples ahead by boat and he dismissed the crowds. Then, "he went up the mountain by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23). Jesus tended his grieving heart by being alone with his own thoughts, memories, and pain, and by being with God, intentionally and quietly. Jesus needed time alone to grieve. He did not, however, stay away for long, isolating himself and losing himself in his grief. After the night alone in prayer and reflection, he returned to his disciples early the next morning. Certainly the story of the reunion is dramatic as Jesus walked on the water toward the boat on which the disciples had spent the night (Matthew 14:25). Reunited with his disciples, Jesus immediately returned to work. As soon as they arrived at Gennesaret, Jesus resumed his healing ministry.

Another death of someone to whom Jesus was very close also caused him deep grief. Jesus' friend Lazarus, the brother of his close friends Mary and Martha, died. Jesus delayed going to Bethany where these friends lived. When he arrived a few days after Lazarus's death, he was met first by Martha and later by Mary. Mary knelt at Jesus' feet and said that her brother would not have died had Jesus been there. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33). Picture this scene; feel the emotion. The description of Jesus' response makes clear the depth of his grief. He was "greatly disturbed" and "deeply moved." How did Jesus tend the emotional upheaval he felt at that moment? "Jesus began to weep" (John 11:35). Jesus released emotion in his tears, joining with the other mourners who were crying for Lazarus. The response helped tend his heart. The writer of the Gospel of John describes how Jesus then took away the grief—his own and that of all the others gathered—by calling Lazarus out from his grave.

A third example of how Jesus dealt with grief came during the final days of his life. After the Passover meal, Jesus took his disciples with him to Gethsemane. "He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me' " (Matthew 26:37-38). Jesus was grieving. The Gospels suggest many reasons for his grief. Instead of embracing the good news about the kingdom of God that he had preached, the Jewish leaders had rejected him—in fact, they actively had opposed him. Jesus was in Jerusalem. He knew that his ministry and perhaps his life were at considerable risk. Soon, Judas would betray him. Other reasons for grief awaited him. He would be arrested. His closest companions would desert him. He would be tried, convicted, and killed.

How did Jesus tend his grief in this dark hour in the garden before the darker hours ahead? First, he talked honestly with his best friends, acknowledging to them his deep grief and asking for their presence in praying with him. Second, he talked honestly with God. Three times he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39). What we hear is blunt honesty: "God, don't make me do this." Finally, however, Jesus moves on to face what he must face. He does so with strength and grace. After waking his sleeping disciples for a third time, he says to them, "Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand" (Matthew 26:46).

Jesus encountered grief many times during the brief period for which we have recorded accounts. These three experiences—John the Baptist's beheading, Lazarus's death, and his own agony during his final days—may have been the most difficult, but surely, they were not the only causes of grief. Through them all, Jesus tended his heart well in his grief.

How can Jesus' example guide us in our own grief? Jesus teaches us to spend time alone, particularly time alone with God, and to return to friends and family to resume the lives we have been called to live. When our grief is overwhelming, we can release it in tears as Jesus did—both privately and in community with others who mourn. We also must talk honestly about our grief, seeking support from close friends and courage and strength from God. Finally, we can face the cup we must face knowing that Jesus has suffered before us and God is suffering with us.