



“A Robe in the Kingdom”

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Rev. 7: 9–17 (NRSV)***

Once in a blue moon, people ask me questions like this: “What’s it like to be a pastor?”

Questions of this nature remind me of other questions that I have been asked most of my life, like, “What’s it like to be a twin?”

My first impulse is to ask a counter-question, such as, “What’s it like *not* to be a twin?” or “What’s it like *not* to be a pastor?”

I want to ask these kinds of questions, because I have very little data on the alternate realities from which these questions originate. I have been a twin all of my life, so I have no idea what it’s like not to be a twin. And I was called to the ministry at age 14, and can barely remember life before that.

Despite the perplexity that these kinds of questions about being a twin or a pastor give me, I pause periodically and try to generate meaningful answers for the uninitiated because I understand that people are genuinely interested in learning about my experience.

What’s it like to be a pastor?

One answer that occurs to me on days like this is to say that being a pastor is like living next door to death and all of the processes and emotions associated with grief and loss.

In earlier times and (still today) in parts of the world where Christianity has had a long stand, pastors and priests lived (and still live) in parsonages or rectories adjacent to church sanctuaries, classrooms, and offices, and on church grounds that include church cemeteries. Some cemeteries date back hundreds of years, and in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East they even date back many centuries or millennia.

Today, many churches are adding memorial gardens and columbaria to their campuses, in order to provide burial options for their members and friends.

So, from a literal perspective, it is correct to say that pastors live next door to death, in that many of us live in close proximity to burial grounds.

It is also correct to make this statement, because when one stops to count, on occasions such as All Saints Sunday, one must realize how frequently and how much more pastors (and church organists and sextons) encounter death in our lives compared with the average person in the pew, or on the street.

I was reminded last week as Kathy Miller and I prepared letters to the families of Eden Church members who have gone to God in the past year, inviting them to this service, that I presided at 11 memorials in the last 12 months, and that over the years in ministry I have averaged 12 funerals a year for roughly 25 years. So that puts me past the century mark at Eden for funerals and at close to the third century mark for memorials in the ministry in general.

So, literally and figuratively, to be a parish pastor is to live next door to death, and to all of the processes and emotions that are associated with grief and loss.

For those who may be wondering what the news is from the front lines, I can say that it doesn't get any easier with frequency or experience. But one learns some things about life and death, and grief and loss, through these processes—things that might be helpful for others, which I will share with you today in the hope that what I have observed and learned may be helpful to you with whatever your experience of loss may be.

II

I didn't plan it this way, but as it turns out, I came up with ten tidy observations about the grief process.

- 1) **If you love big, you lose big**, which is to say that you feel a significant loss when a loved one dies. Hard as it is to feel this loss, it's better than the alternative. It's better to have loved big and hurt big, than to have missed having your loved one in your life.
- 2) **The death of a significant loved one launches a long and circuitous grief process.** Hospice pioneer Elizabeth Kübler-Ross¹ and others in the human sciences offer descriptions of the grief process which depict grief as a cyclical process² involving denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—in no tidy order or timeframe. No two people grieve the loss of the same person in the same way, and no one person experiences the loss of multiple loved ones the same way each time.
- 3) **Grief is cumulative.** Unresolved grief piles up like snow accumulates in a blizzard. Each new loss heaps more snow on the pile, so that it becomes possible to be “snowed in” by grief. If you don't deal with it as it unfolds in your life, grief can become an obstacle to your individual health and happiness and to your relationships with others, especially because grief isn't just experienced and expressed as sadness, but sometimes shows up as anger or depression. If you

¹ See <http://www.ekrfoundation.org/about-grief>

² See <http://www.ekrfoundation.org/five-stages-of-grief>

sense that you are stuck in grief, that you are having trouble returning to a sense of “normalcy” in your life, and that your feelings of grief are not diminishing in intensity or persistence over time, you may be getting snowed in. Ask for help.

- 4) **There are no shortcuts through the grief process.** Disregard all of the messages that you get from pop culture about getting over grief in a short amount of time, or finding an exact road map that will guide you through it. The only way through grief, is through it. And in all honesty, in some cases, it’s not possible this side of heaven to get all the way through it. Grief is unavoidable and there isn’t an exact timeline for moving through it. However, it is possible to achieve healing and relief and to arrive at a new sense of normalcy as we move further along on our journeys.
- 5) **The grief process varies for each person,** depending on our personality type, coping skills and style, spiritual practices, ethnicity, gender, religious heritage, and current beliefs. Becoming more aware of how our personal and cultural factors and our spiritual practices, religious heritage, and current beliefs shape our experience of loss and grief will help us better understand ourselves, and why and how we handle grief and loss the way we do. Becoming more self-aware will also help us move through these processes with more grace and less angst. Knowing these things about ourselves can also help you understand and cope with those whose grief process is different from ours.
- 6) **Grief can be normal or it can be complicated.** “Normal grief” is grief that results when an old person dies, who has had a rich and meaningful life and generally healthy relationships with his or her loved ones. In normal grief, the deceased person’s survivors are sad, but in time they heal and can develop a new sense of normal life and are not held back by unresolved issues with the person who has passed. “Complicated grief,” by contrast, is a phenomenon that results when a person dies of unnatural causes (like an accident, suicide, or murder) or when the person who dies is young, or when the deceased’s relationships with survivors were unhealthy, and the person died before these issues could get resolved. In complicated grief, unresolved feelings and conflicts intrude on survivors’ daily lives, making it difficult to establish and maintain a sense of peace and balance.
- 7) **Children grieve too,** but they often express their grief differently from adults. It’s helpful to learn about the differences between how children and adults grieve, so that we can better meet the needs of the children in our care, and recognize when they may need help beyond the help that we can offer them. For example, children need comfort and frequent reassurance that they’re safe, loved, and taken care of. It’s important for us to be honest, simple, and direct when talking with them about death. We need to encourage children to express their feelings by talking, drawing, and playing. All of us benefit from routine during stressful times, but children especially are helped by having and maintaining a sense of normal routine. As with adults, children can benefit from the help of a support group.³

³ See <http://www.ekrfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/HelpingGrievingChildren.pdf>

- 8) **Grief is universal.** Though each person's experience is unique, sharing the journey with others who have experienced similar losses helps most people advance through the process in healthy ways. If you are having trouble finding people who empathize with your situation, or if you feel that those around you aren't able to help you work through your grief, it's likely time to come and see the pastor, or find a spiritual director, a grief support group, a professional counselor, or all of the above.
- 9) **Paying attention to the theological aspects of death can help us grieve in a healthy, mature way, and accept and embrace our own aging process.** Pastors, deacons, and other members of our faith community can help us sort through our beliefs about death, and grow and develop spiritually in ways that keep us from becoming snowed in by grief, and that enable us to cope more successfully with our own human frailty and finitude.
- 10) **Spiritual practices can also be helpful resources in our healing processes.** I am struck, for example, by how many otherwise secular venues are constructing labyrinths in public spaces today, so that people who are dealing with difficult circumstances have a place to meditate and move through their difficulties in a helpful way. For example, the Ashland Youth Center, a hospital courtyard in San Francisco, and a beachfront near the Bay Bridge all have labyrinths. If you're interested in exploring a spiritual practice that may be helpful to you in the grief process, check out the worship bulletin today for information about the upcoming small group ministry that Jenifer Miller is leading this fall, the December labyrinth walk that Mary Haro is leading, or the *Nacimiento* project that Pedro Ramos Goycolea is facilitating this Advent.

III

My pastoral hope is that everyone in our congregation will have or find a meaningful spiritual practice that helps us work through grief and grow in our faith. Listening to (and singing) music are spiritual practices that have been particularly helpful for me over the years.

Today's scripture reading from Revelations 7, for example, points to a Spiritual song about heaven that has moved and strengthened me. The song is titled "I've Got a Robe."⁴ It speaks to the hope of heaven, and the promise of a robe, a crown, and shoes in the next life. The power of this music is palpable. In the great tradition of the African-American Spiritual style, the mood and tempo of the song progresses like this, as it is performed: start off slow, go down low, come up high, and light 'em on fire. When I hear this song sung, or as I sing it, I am moved by and with the music—from the sadder, harder feelings of grief—to the more joyful and hopeful feelings that God longs for us to experience.

Our ancestors in the faith knew about the healing power of music, too. This is why they included the book of Psalms and the book of Lamentations among their sacred texts.

⁴ See http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/going_to_shout_all_over_god_s_heaven.htm

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Psalms is a collection of hymns addressing numerous themes, similar to *The New Century Hymnal* in our pews. Lamentations, by contrast, grew out of Ancient Israel's experience of defeat and exile in Babylon, much like the Spirituals grew out of the African-American slave experience in this country, and how the blues grew out of the everyday struggles of African-Americans in the years following the Civil War.⁵

Spirituals were songs that helped slaves cope with slavery and find the courage to struggle for freedom in discouraging times. Similarly, the blues, in later years, were written and sung to chase away grief. The lyrics and style gave voice to betrayal, poverty, death, loss, and numerous other hardships, so that the musicians and the listeners might unburden themselves of sadness through performance and listening, and feel lighter and more prepared to carry on as a result of singing, playing, and hearing the blues.

So it is appropriate that we sing songs that help us move through personal and corporate grief in our own time. The ancient Israelites knew the importance of expressing grief through poetry and song, just like twentieth-century American blues singers did. That's why they included Psalms and Lamentations among their sacred texts.

Ancient examples of laments and modern examples of spirituals and blues provide evidence that people of faith have long found music to be a helpful spiritual practice for coping and moving through grief, and growing in faith. Continuing to pursue these practices keeps us in good stead with our ancestors in the faith.

We also know from the example of scripture that the lyrics of a song can speak across the generations, as countless people have found guidance and validation in the lyrics of a song.

So music has helped me and many others through grief over the years. I wonder, what is the spiritual practice that has been (or could be) a blessing in your life in these tender times? Do you have a spiritual practice? If not, now would be a good time to develop one. Amen.

⁵ Some of the great modern blues singers included: Lead Belly, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Lady Day, etc.