

Nov. 6, 2011

## WE DO NOT GRIEVE

The Slinky is one of the best toys ever invented. As a child, I remember playing with one and putting it on the top stair so as to watch it climb all the way down.

But as an adult and a pastor, I appreciate the Slinky because it helps get an essential point across about grief. When we lose a loved one, we think we are at Point A where we feel awful, but we will gradually make our way in a straight line to Point B, where we will feel normal again – not the old normal, but a new normal.

But grief is not a straight line. Grief is like a Slinky.

Immediately after our loss, we are so busy with details: the funeral or memorial service, getting the news to friends and family, taking care of things like life insurance and Social Security. For that first month, we are kept very busy with practical things.

That's why the feelings of grief and loss may hit us harder a month after the fact than at the actual time of the death. And the worst part is, all of our friends have generally moved on with our lives. We've picked up our casserole dishes and sent our cards, and we may no longer think to ask, "How are you doing?" Or we may ask, and accept the answer of, "Fine" when in fact our friend feels anything but fine.

Grief is not a straight line: it is like a Slinky that twists back and forth, takes us down into a valley, and finally back up again. We don't go neatly through the stages of grief – of denial, anger, depression and so forth – but rather, we are likely to bounce back and forth between them.

So in light of All Saints Sunday, I want to talk about grief on a couple of levels. I want to share some practical advice for those who grieve and those who comfort, and then before we

move into our celebration of the lives of our saints, I want to talk about what it means when Paul asserts, “We do not grieve as others who have no hope.”

When we lose a loved one, one of the signs of grief is we become very forgetful. That’s because grief causes the rational side of the brain to take a vacation while the emotional side takes over. People who are in grief will literally look in their checkbooks and not know what 1+1 equals. And their fear is, “Great – on top of everything else, I’m getting Alzheimer’s.”

I remember sharing this information with a family as they were planning a woman’s funeral up north. A few days later before the service, one of the sons came over and thanked me. He said he had barely noted my instructions when I met with them. But that morning as they were getting ready for the funeral, his 80-year-old uncle – a brother to his mother – came out of the room in a panic. Since he was 16 years old, he had been tying his own tie. But that morning, he literally couldn’t do it. And the family, which would have been thrown in a tailspin by this memory loss, was able to remember my words to them and assure their uncle that this was normal. It was a part of grief.

As friends to bereaved persons, one of the best things we can do for them is be a brain. When a surviving spouse is considering whether move to another location to be nearer children, or surviving children are debating of when or how to dispose of someone’s belongings, help them be able to think of all of the pros and cons to their decision. They need to be the ones who ultimately decide what to do, but they need us to help them consider all of the ramifications.

Another part of grief is that for the first year after a death, expect to be hit extra hard with every first – the first birthday or anniversary they miss, the first Mother’s or Father’s Day they are absent, and especially the upcoming first holidays where they will not be present. That’s one of the reasons I am grateful All Saints Day is planned for the first of November. As the holidays

approach, it is good for us to say again the names that loved ones haven't heard in the past weeks and months – to remind them that this person did live and continues to live in our memories.

Finally, I want to assure us and remind us that Christians are allowed to grieve. Yes, we accept the promises that God gave us of eternal life, and we cling to stories of the Easter resurrection. But that doesn't mean we aren't allowed to grieve.

What is the shortest verse in the Bible? “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35) And what was the occasion? It was the funeral of Lazarus, a friend to Jesus. Jesus had just spoken with Lazarus' sister Martha and assured her, “I am the resurrection, and I am life.” But when the other sister Mary also comes and speaks with Jesus and he asks where the body has been buried, we're told “Jesus wept.”

Jesus, who knew how beautiful heaven was, wept. Jesus – who knew in a few moments that he would raise Lazarus back to life – wept. In the face of the grief and loss that day, Jesus did not keep a stiff upper lip. No, Jesus wept. And so, it is appropriate that we too weep for loved ones, and we weep with their survivors.

But as we weep, hear again the words of Paul from 1 Thessalonians 4:13: “... (that) you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” When Paul was writing, there was a growing concern among the Christians at Thessalonica. Jesus had promised the disciples that he would come again to earth. And they thought that meant immediately or at least within their lifetimes.

But now, Christians are dying, and there is no sign yet of Christ. So believers are beginning to worry that either they had missed the Second Coming, or their loved ones would miss it because they had died and were buried.

We were talking Wednesday in Bible study about what happens when we die. And the answer depends on which scripture we are consulting at the time. What Paul wanted to assure the

Thessalonians and us is that at the point of final Judgment, those who have died will have their physical bodies – whether they are buried in caskets, cremated or buried at sea – their bodies will be raised up again to be reunited with their souls. God created humans out of dust and breathed life into us, so I'm sure God can do it again. And those who are still alive will likewise be raised up and reunited again with God in heaven – and with our loved ones.

But there's one more promise that gives us courage and comfort today. That word is contained in the Apostle's Creed, which we will recite before communion today. And that phrase is that we believe "in the communion of saints."

While we come forward today to receive communion in the form of bread and grape juice, we will be met by the saints above who will be having communion directly with Jesus above us. Their hope in life everlasting has been fulfilled, and it's as if they are in the grandstand of heaven, watching over us and encouraging us as we continue in our own spiritual race.

May we indeed this day grieve, but not as those who have no hope.