

Advent Gathering 2017

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“Grief, I’ve learned is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go”

My JVE volunteer experience centers around grief and loss. I work with families at Portland’s Dougy Center for Grieving Children and for Portland TIP (Trauma Intervention Program). The Dougy center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults and their families grieving a death can share their experiences. TIP is a National Emotional First Aid provides support to neighbors, coworkers, clients, family members and strangers immediately following any type of tragedy, in this case, sudden death.

I’ve had people tell me that those who believe need not grieve. Needless to say, I’ve been feeling some frustration and conflict about this comment. So, I thought I would “source” an anecdote and found a bible passage that helps: 1 Thessalonians 4:13, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest mankind, who have no hope.”

For Catholic’s, the ultimate meaning of our suffering is ultimately found in the Cross – where the greatest evil happened – murder - also resulted in the greatest good that ever happened: Redemption.

Grief, like Advent, is a journey with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is not for the faint-hearted. Advent and grief comes at times when our bodies are weary and our souls ready for the justice and peace. And like the life of Christ, it takes tremendous courage and can be extremely daunting. It takes great strength and when it is over, leaves us with tremendous resilience and even joy.

In grief, being mindful of the sacredness of time encourages us to be mindful of God and nurtures awareness. In my readings, I am reminded of St. Teresa of Avila whose wisdom is shown through a simple and profound poem, grasps time well:

Let nothing upset you, let nothing startle you. All things pass; God never changes. Engaging in the rituals of our faith, surrounded by sacred symbols drawn from our ordinary lives – bread, wine, water, oil, and flame – reassures us that all of life is sacred. The rhythm of the liturgical year reminds us that life must have a meaningful rhythm as well.

If grief were a sacrament, sorrow would be the form while tears and the absence of the beloved would be the matter.

And like the “holy darkness” of Advent when heaven’s answer seems hidden from our sight, God may seem maddeningly absent in grief, but He is not. Those in grief are not a burden – they are precious, they are needed and their pain is sacred – and where they stand is holy ground.

In this season of anticipation and preparation from solemnity, repentance and ultimately joy, may God continue to bless and heal you and may He grant us all the gift to be for you what you need.