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Our Anxious Grief: A Christian Response to Death

God, Creator and Ruler of All . . . set us free from our anxious grief.
(Ambrose)

Joy and I were excited. Today we would discover whether our child would be a boy or a girl. Today was the routine twentieth-week ultrasound. We playfully considered the name of our baby. If it were a girl, we would name it after Joy's grandmother Margaret. The two of us had gotten stuck on the boy's name, when the technician arrived and prepared us for seeing our child on the television screen. He explained what we could expect during the procedure, but asked that we let him do a full examination before asking questions. We agreed and anticipated.

The screen came on, and we saw the baby. It was beautiful even in black and white. I smiled even as I noticed the technician's furrowed brow. At first it seemed that he was just proceeding with the examination, but eventually he kept working the same spot again and again. "Has the baby ever kicked, Mrs. Utzinger?" *My God, I haven't seen a heartbeat!* "I don't think so." *He can't find a heartbeat!* "I'll be right back. I need to speak to the doctor on call."

Joy and I instinctively reached for one another's hand and prayed. Although I spoke aloud, I do not remember the words. The air in the room suddenly seemed lifeless and sterile. The door opened. The technician nervously reappeared and said that our child was dead. "I hope I handled this well for you two," he added. "This is the first time I have had to tell someone something like this." Were I not feeling ill, I might have noticed the irony of the moment. This man wanted my approval and sympathy; I had neither to give. Joy and I returned home and collapsed into each other's arms.

THE VITAL LIE

In our culture we live by what Ernest Becker called a "vital lie": that death is not important and can be ignored (Becker, 1971). Critics commonly observe that our culture sanitizes itself from the elderly and dying by placing them in convalescent or nursing homes. Americans have typically moved death out of family homes and churches and placed it into the hands of specialists, such as psychologists and funeral

home directors. We are a nation that is fascinated with the means of death, yet rarely considers the immense problem that death itself poses. Our cinema, theater, art, and literature focus upon violence, abuse, and hatred as acts which denigrate the individual; however, little thought is given to the greatest offender of human dignity: death. There can be no dignity if one ceases to be human at all.

Consider the media's coverage of the death of Princess Diana. While there have been some moving tributes to her life and humanitarian pursuits, her death and its meaning has stymied our news reporters. The issues raised by Diana's death, according to the media, have surrounded paparazzi, drinking and driving, and the public's complicity in reading tabloids, yet they do not provide a meaning for the loss of her life. Were there lessons to be learned from her death? The media would have us believe that an important lesson was that one should not travel at high speeds in tunnels without fastened seatbelts. Other journalists chided the French transportation department for ignoring the importance of guardrails on public roads. However, such attempts to provide a meaning for Diana's death ring hollow upon close inspection. The lessons for which we seem to be groping circle around the idea that her death could have been prevented. It seems that no one has considered that the tragedy of Diana's death was not that it was preventable but that it was inevitable. This is the lesson, which our culture carefully avoids, about which we tell lies.

Christians, one should expect, would expose such untruth about death, yet the vital lie filters into our churches as well. We flock to Easter services every year, while pews remain empty on Good Friday. The theological project of "demythologizing" the resurrection de-emphasizes the problem of physical corruption for which resurrection is the antidote. Such a project also betrays a subtle dualism between body and soul, which suggests that when the physical has perished nothing essential has been lost. These practices, among others, help obscure the significance of death for human beings, who are body, mind, and spirit. As a result we have trouble ministering to the grieving and contemplating death from a Christian perspective. Upon the death of my child, I began to consider grief and death. I believe that Christians in this country have a long way to go before they have grappled honestly with these two issues. What I offer here are modest reflections, which perhaps may contribute to an ongoing conversation in the Church.

GRIEF AND ST. AUGUSTINE

Grief after loss, while necessary, is difficult, but we Christians do have guides. During the weeks following the miscarriage, I found myself reading and rereading Augustine's description of his grief following the death of his mother St. Monica:

As I lay alone in bed, I remembered the verses of your servant Ambrose and realized the truth of them:

God, Creator and Ruler of all,
who clothes the day with beautiful light
and the night with restful grace
to restore tired and quieted limbs for toil and use,
let wearied minds be uplifted
and set us free from our anxious grief.
(Author's trans.)

Then little by little, my old feelings about your handmaid came back to me. I thought of her devoted love for you and the tenderness and patience she had shown me, like a holy woman that she was. Of all this I found myself suddenly deprived, and it was a comfort to me to weep for her and for myself and to offer my tears to you for her sake and mine. The tears which I had been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested, for my weeping sounded in your ears alone, not in the ears of men who might have misconstrued it and despised it (Bk. 1x, Pat. 12, 202).

A former professor and mentor of mine pointed out to me the subversiveness of this prayer. Augustine would not have found himself unfamiliar with a culture that fends off emotions of grief with such pithy sayings as “be a man,” “you have to move on,” or “all things happen for a reason.” The classical notion that God is simple dictated that he be apathetic. Emotion, it was said, divides God and suggests that he can be influenced and moved by something other than himself. In a like manner, therefore, pathos was seen to be a denigration of the human being. Augustine's reflections on death, however, gives honor to pathos and grief. Tears of grief can be an acceptable prayer and sacrifice to God, when you have nothing else to offer (such as approval or sympathy).

And now, O Lord, I make you my confession in this book. Let any man read who will. Let him understand it as he will. And if he finds that I have sinned by weeping for my mother, even if only for a fraction of an hour, let him not mock me. For this was the mother, now dead and hidden awhile from my sight, who had wept over me for many years so that I might live in your sight. Let him not mock at me but weep himself, if his charity is great (202–203).

The mockery of which Augustine speaks is a lack of Christian solidarity and love with a grieving brother or sister. He asks that we should weep with him, if we have love. Such mockery might include the

sentiment that we would have handled loss differently (read: better or more seemly) than the bereaved, the belief that we can promote some kind of “grief damage control” by positing God’s providence, or the assumption that there is nothing that can be done for a person who has suffered loss. Upon seeing those who mourned for Lazarus, Christ himself was deeply moved and troubled in spirit. Jesus wept.

EXPERIENCE, FAITH, AND INCARNATION

Some believers overlook the Christian significance of death and loss because they have not experienced it themselves. Many view lack of experience as an unbridgeable chasm which forever separates individuals on the basis of culture, gender, race, or personal history. This understanding of the world leaves the individual alone to make sense of a world created by himself. I too have fallen prey to this kind of thinking; its currents run deep in our individualistic culture, which glorifies Horatio Alger and the pioneer on the frontier. Religiously, this individualism translates into a propensity to theologize one’s own experience. Such a project, however, almost always betrays a lack of humility. If Christians neglect the deposit of our faith carefully guarded by our forebears, theology becomes an exercise in self-glorification, often self-gratification. Like Narcissus we gaze into the spring we call God, content to see our own lonely reflections.

Christians, however, see experience through faith, rather than faith through experience. Writing to the Ephesians St. Paul wrote, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all and through all and in all” (4:4-6). In the common faith, which we share by virtue of our baptism into the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we find ourselves transformed into a community, one body with Christ as our head. The Christian, therefore, has the opportunity to see the experience of another through the eyes of a common faith. Having drunk from the same Spirit, she also necessarily suffers loss when a brother or sister in Christ suffers loss.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul warns that we cannot faithfully remain isolated from other members of the Church:

Now the body is not made up of one part but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where

would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body (12:14-20).

While Paul claims that the community of faith is not divided despite a multiplicity of vocations, I believe that this notion can be extended to all those differences in the Church, whether race, culture, gender, age, or personal history. We become complicit with our own sins of divisiveness, therefore, if we glorify difference such that members of the body are considered independent or expendable. A human body suffers if it loses an eye or a limb; however, the separated eye or limb itself suffers a far worse fate—it ceases to be human at all. In the same way, the Church is incomplete without all its members, and the members are nothing apart from the body. In other words, in the Church our lives make claims upon one another. Paul notes that “God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (12:24-26). If Christians ignore the suffering of their brothers or sisters they participate in an exercise of self-hatred. Understanding this is the beginning of learning to grieve with those who have suffered loss in the body of Christ.

Joy and I found solace and support in the community of faith. I did not find myself surprised that a God who became incarnate showed his love to us through members of his body, the Church. By grieving with us, making us meals, visiting us, or sending flowers I experienced the incarnate Lord. The Church as the mystical body of Christ makes God present for us and for the world. The Gospels consistently remind us of our obligation to the poor, oppressed, and suffering of the world; therefore, consider how much more we are obliged to minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Such manifestations of incarnation, however, suggests that death has importance. Christians cannot participate in the exorcism of death’s significance prevailing in our culture and at the same time expect that they can minister fully to the bereaved. The Church must articulate why death is important or be content to turn over all the issues surrounding grief to psychologists and counselors.

PERSON AND NATURE

Joy’s and my miscarriage is not important just because it happened to us, the parents. Its significance, and therefore its tragedy, lay in the fact that a human being of great worth has been lost. For centuries our forebears have reflected on the implications of classical christology for a theological anthropology. Chalcedonian christology asserted that the Son, the second person (or hypostasis) of the Trinity, is “recognized in

two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." The hypostasis of the Son is characterized as his mode of existence (that he is eternally begotten of the Father). The natures of the Son consist of his being fully human and fully divine. Reflecting on the development of this christology, theologian John Meyendorff wrote: "The concept of hypostasis [as worked out by the Cappadocian fathers] cannot be reduced to that of 'particular' nor to that of 'relation.' The hypostasis is not the product of nature: it is that in which nature exists, the very principle of its existence" (Meyendorff, 1987:77).

All this is to say that human nature cannot exist without human personhood (or hypostasis). One way in which human beings are created in God's image is that we are personal. Although our natures are infected by death and sin, we nonetheless have dignity as persons. Joy's and my unborn child, despite the reality that she suffered from the same corruption as you and I, had a hypostatic existence. That baby, with or without a fully developed body or mind, possessed an inherent dignity of personhood. While the ethical implications of this line of thinking could be fruitfully mined by the thoughtful theologian, I am content to observe a single point: the Christian cannot see death and refuse to admit that something is terribly wrong. A unique person of great worth and importance has vanished. My child can no longer receive my love, which I was meant to give and she to accept. Her death has created an incompleteness in her life and mine.

THE LAST ENEMY

One explanation of death Christians often employ suggests that a tragic event or circumstance constitutes God's will. How often did Joy and I hear that, while we may not understand it now, God intended our tragedy? Paul, writing of Christ, provides a counterpoint to this line of thinking: "The end will come, when he hands over the kingdom of God to the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:24-26). Death is an enemy of Christ. The God of Life does not will the death of another. God's very name as revealed to Israel, I AM, bespeaks the fact that God is life and being itself.

Questions about death can certainly be asked. It is possible, for example, that God permits a death because of mercy, but I do not know how this could be determined. Most of the time the Christian finds herself in the Wilderness with few answers. While such inquiries about death may have their place, I believe that the Christian should be wary about her questions concerning the why of death, because this too can be an escape from the tragedy of death itself. Simply, death occurs be-

cause there is sin and corruption in the world. However, focusing on the cause of death will never provide the seeker with its meaning. Death itself is meaninglessness, disorder, the absence of life. The significance of death can only be found in the fact that we know it must be remedied. The Scriptures say that the whole creation groans in anticipation of redemption “that it will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:22). We Christians, like the rest of creation, anticipate the redemption of our bodies as adopted children of God. This redemption, however, has not yet happened, and we suffer, even groan, in hope of it.

The question remains, therefore, how can we experience the peace of God in the face of such a tragic reality as death? St. Paul reminds us that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18). I find this statement a remarkable one, because the suffering of those who survive the death of a loved one is quite considerable. I will live with the pain of the death of my child for a long time, if not forever. So, imagine the hope implicit in the apostle’s statement. We live in the hope of the resurrection, the day in which death will be swallowed up in victory. Indeed, “if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor 15:19).

Nonetheless, hope in Christ is not only for the future! Christians understand a great mystery of faith revealed in the Letter to the Romans: “God works all things together for the good of those who love him” (8:28). This translation of the Greek is surely preferable to: “And we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God.” Unlike the ideas implicit in the latter translation, the story of the death of our baby does not exemplify God’s elaborate plan triumphing over my life, Joy’s life, and our baby’s life—despite any of us. Rather, as the former translation suggests, the passage testifies to God’s grace and love. This grace and love provides a place for the suffering to stand in the midst of tragedy. The passage reveals a mystery that God can use evil and death for good, and this need not connote that God is their author.

The confession that God works all things together for the good of those who love him is not a formula to make sense of the past; rather it is a promise concerning the present and future. It is a promise that God will, under the worst of circumstances, provide the grace upon which we can stand, learn, and even grow from the tragedies of sin and death. Constantly in this life we live with the burden of the Cross, its shame and its suffering. We also cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Christians know, however, that God used the ultimate tragedy for good. Christ’s death on the Cross conquered sin

and death. Resurrected, Jesus himself was the first fruits of this victory. God allowed himself to die in order that we could be redeemed and have hope in the resurrection. It is in this hope that we can have peace and confess:

For none of us has life in himself,
and none becomes his own master when he dies.
For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,
and if we die, we die in the Lord.
So, then, whether we live or die,
we are the Lord's possession (Rom 14:8).

The pain which the bereaved suffer is indeed profound; however, Christ's death and resurrection maintains the significance of the death of a loved one and provides hope for the Christian. The Church must not avoid or sanitize death like the culture around us. If we do not acknowledge the tragedy and horror of death we cannot minister to those who grieve. More importantly, if we act as if death is not significant, we cannot preach the Gospel of Christ to the nations. In the end, to ignore the importance of death is to trivialize the Cross.

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