

1 Thess. 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

I love stories. I love to tell stories, listen to stories, read stories, make up stories. To me, stories get to the heart of whatever is important in life. I know it sounds strange, but some of my favorite storytelling occurs at the end of a life. We sit around a dining table or around my office, and we plan a service that will tell a story.

Tell me about your mom, I say--tell me about who she was, the things that were most important about her, and most important to her. And as I listen, I hear families, I hear you, looking for the words to describe: she was thrifty and hard working; he was a mischievous kind of guy. And the words, the descriptions never seem to be enough. I hear you fumble around in a dark room, searching for words, feeling all along the walls for the phrase, the thing that will capture this beloved one, and then suddenly, your hand finds a handle. It is a story, and as you tell it, the handle turns, and a door is opened on a life. She wasn't just thrifty--once, when she found a really good sale on toilet paper at Walgreens, she used up a tank of gas driving all over town to buy up all the toilet paper at every Walgreens. She's still got toilet paper stocked up in that house. My son wasn't just mischievous. One time he and his brother coated their slippers with vaseline

and used it to slide across the carpet in the living room. That spot of carpet never did fluff up again no matter how much we vacuuumed it.

Tom Montgomery Fate talks about losing his father after the long and painful journey of Alzheimer's. He writes that the things that mattered the most in his father's life were not the facts, not the provable or the certain, not the days of the week or his Social Security number or the number of congregants in the last church he served. What mattered was the wild swirl of stories that he carried—that holy reservoir of images and moments, of love and loss—that told him who he was.

Our stories are what we know about life. About our life. About the world and other people. They are our journey of learning to love and to deal with pain. We write stories about who we have been and who we have become. We tell future tales about who we might be, or what our children might do. We piece together stories of who God is. We hold out before us the daydreamy stories of what we will do with our spouses one day when we finally have the time.

And then, inevitably, the story gets away from us. As if the pen begins writing for us, we flip the page, and suddenly we are in the midst of a story we would not have written. Perhaps for you it is a story of a tragic and sudden death, your beloved, the one you thought you could protect. Perhaps it is a story of a slow, drawn out disease, of watching a brightly blooming flower wither away. This is not the story you would have chosen.

Now what?

In this passage from 1 Thessalonians, we find new Christians wondering what to do when the story gets away from them--when things don't go as planned. Paul's letter to them is a response. Paul has heard from them, perhaps through a letter of their own, he has heard that they are confused. I can only imagine how their letter might have gone: "Dear Paul, This is not what you said would happen. You

said that Jesus was coming back soon. Soon and VERY soon. You said that we would be together, that Jesus would gather us together for eternal life in this new heaven, new earth place. But Paul, my brother is gone; the one I love is gone." The story didn't go the way I thought it would go.

Perhaps you have written a similar letter, or said a similar prayer, to God. God, this is not the way it's supposed to go. We were supposed to be together longer; he was supposed to outlive me; her life shouldn't have ended like this.

One of the worst things about death is that, as if losing the person weren't enough, death robs us of even more. Our grief is not limited to the person who has died, though that alone would be enough; much more is lost--lost dreams, lost plans, lost relationships, even lost identity. Often times we lose some or all of our faith, whether we name that publicly or admit it only to ourselves.

Grief comes in all forms. All shapes, all different levels of intensity. It may come quickly and it may drag on for an eternity. It may seem to have passed and then crop up unexpectedly. I have heard it described as unpredictable, wild, and undomesticated. For some, grief begins with outrageous, visceral intensity, like a white-hot light that you have to shield your eyes from, so bright, so hot that you do not dare touch it. For others, it is a dull, aching glow--an old fashioned bulb pulsing, never overwhelmingly bright, but accompanied by an incessant hum--it just won't go away. For some, grief proceeds, and we have a feeling of movement through stages and some sense of healing, a return to hopefulness. For others, that movement is broken up--like a road of potholes, it's just...bumpy.

Those who grieve, hear this. You who grieve today, whether you have grieved for 20 minutes, or 20 years, whether you continue to cry yourself to sleep, or not, whether you feel you have moved on, or not, whether you continue to believe in the goodness of God, or not, hear this: there is nothing *wrong* with you. there is nothing wrong with your grief.

Grief--unpredictable, wild, undomesticated grief--is never fully in our control. It refuses control; some days it is quietly present, and other days it looms large. But always, grief unflinchingly reminds us of the horrifying truth that confronted us in our initial loss--the truth that we are not in control of life. We have as little

control over the process of grief as we have over the reality of death. This is not the story we would have chosen. And we didn't get to choose.

But perhaps the promise is this: that as Paul says, our grief is not without hope. When the story we have written is shattered to pieces, that is not the end of the story. We grieve, and we gather up the fragments and broken pieces and we attempt to piece it together into a new story. Perhaps now that story is missing a piece. Others may help us to pick up the pieces; they may tend to our wounds when the pieces are sharp; they may help us put our story together again. But all the while we lean on the hope that our story is part of a larger story--that we ourselves are perhaps a fragment--a broken piece that is being gathered together with other pieces--with those we love and those we have lost, gathered together, as Tom Long says, gathered into that great unending story fashioned by God's grace.

Today as we observe All Saint's Sunday, you'll notice that our stoles are white--the color we wear for All Saint's is the same color we wear for a funeral, and it's the same color we wear at Easter. Today, of all days, is a festival Sunday. It is a day when we name aloud the names of those we've lost. We name aloud our grief, and the pain of losing our friends, our children, our beloved ones; and then we name aloud the hope of resurrection.

Paul does not promise us that we can avoid grief. He doesn't try to tell us the modern lie that death is natural, that it's just a part of life that we shouldn't struggle with. Death is a part of all of our stories, but it is not the end of our story. No, for Paul, and for us, the end of the story is death's defeat. The end of the story is the trumpet sound and Jesus' victory cry, "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of hell and death. Because I live, you shall live also." It's an ending that we ourselves could not have written, but one that has been written for us, in which we will join together with that great company, singing Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Summary: Grief is an inevitable and terrible time in our lives. Paul promises that through Christ, neither death nor grief will be the end of our story.