

“Good Grief”

Matthew 14:13-21

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
August 3, 2008

Communion Devotion

“Today I wept for a man I never met,” wrote one blogger upon hearing of the death of Dr. Randy Pausch. Dr. Pausch, the forty seven year old professor of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and co-author of the book, The Last Lecture, has been in the news a lot lately. Two years ago he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and last fall he began preparing to die. He knew that he had just a few months to live, so he resigned from his teaching position and moved with his wife and three children to Chesapeake, Virginia to be close to Jai’s family.

His final duty as a professor was to deliver “The Last Lecture” at Carnegie Mellon. Annually, a professor would be selected to address the question, “What wisdom would you impart to the world if you knew this was your last lecture?” Since Pausch had only months to live and was leaving the school, he was asked to deliver this lecture on September 18, 2007. Over ten million people have watched the lecture on You Tube and it was expanded into a book by the same title. I am confident that a movie will follow now that Dr. Pausch has died.

In his book, Pausch wrote about the importance of overcoming obstacles, living life to the fullest and helping others achieve their dreams. Here are some of the gems he shared with his students and readers.

“Brick walls are not there to keep us out, but to show us how badly we want something.”

“If I had only three words of advice, they would be, ‘Tell the truth.’ If I had three more, they would be, ‘All the time.’ ”

“I’ve never found that anger made a situation better. So why get angry and bitter over having cancer. I don’t choose the cards dealt to me, but I do choose how I play them and I do not choose to be angry or an object of pity.”

“It’s not about achieving your dreams, but how you live your life. If you live properly, dreams will come to you.”

“No one is pure evil. Be patient. Their good side will emerge.”

“Don’t complain. Just work harder.”

“Keep a crayon in your pocket as a reminder of your childhood. Smell it occasionally so you will never lose your child-like wonder for life.”

Time listed him last year as one of the most influential people in the world. I understand why. His lecture and book have inspired millions to live each day to the fullest and die with dignity. What a healthy way he chose to confront his mortality.

If you listened to his lecture, do you recall how he ended it? He said that he did not write the lecture last fall for the students of Carnegie Mellon University. He wrote it for his three children, Dylan (6), Logan (4) and Chloe (2). This was one of the safety nets he sewed for his children to help them deal with their grief in years to come. In many ways, it helped him process his own grief, too.

How do you process grief? What do you do to cope with it and heal? Today’s text gives us some insight into the way Jesus dealt with his grief. The man who baptized him and prepared the way for his ministry died a cruel death at the hands of King Herod. Without a doubt, Jesus was stunned and deeply hurt over John the Baptist’s death and the manner in which he died. So what did he do? He withdrew to a deserted place for some time to be alone. When he saw the crowd that came looking for him, though, he turned his attention toward them and met their needs. He healed the sick and fed the hungry.

I'm sure you recognize the contrast in Jesus' response to hearing about John's death. Why did he interrupt his solitude to help people? What message was he sending to his disciples? What message is there in this story for us?

All of us have or will suffer great loss. At times we see it coming or it may catch us by surprise. Both have occurred in our church this summer and perhaps your family as well. I know that many of our members are still reeling over Dane Sanderlin's death. No one saw this coming, that's for sure.

I don't know if Jesus knew that John the Baptist was going to die so quickly after he began his own ministry, but losing him hurt Jesus badly. You know how you feel about the person that baptized you and helped with your spiritual formation. No doubt Jesus felt the same way. His grief was real and deep.

Healing from a great loss will require some things of us, as our text reveals. What are they? What did Jesus do after hearing of John the Baptist's death? First of all, he spent some time alone, away from the disciples and the clamoring crowd.

What did he do during this private time? The text doesn't say, however, I can speculate as I'm sure you can. I believe he cried, prayed and considered his own future. He had to decide if he would continue with his ministry knowing what the risks were.

Obviously he did, for he immediately reached out to those that were struggling with their own issues of life and death. When he saw the crowd searching for him, he did not complain or go the other way to avoid them. Instead, he had compassion upon them and met their needs one by one. Even when the disciples wanted to send the crowd away as evening and meal time approached, Jesus would not let them do it. He figured out a way to feed them rather than send them home hungry.

Deep down I wonder if Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death. He knew they would be in shock. Their wounds would be deep and painful. Healing would seem so remote if at all possible.

Perhaps he was being a role model that would lead the way for them. They would look back upon the time he lost John and recall how he handled his grief. Inspired by him, they, too, would spend time alone, but then respond to the needs of the hungry masses with deeds of compassion and goodwill.

Was he preparing us for our inevitable journeys through the valley of the shadow of death? I believe so. We, too, will need to spend time alone crying, praying and considering our future. Then we will need to open our eyes and see the people all around that need our help. I think he wanted us to understand that it is in helping them carry their load that ours will get lighter.

As we gather around this sacred table, I encourage you to pray. You may be experiencing a deep level of pain from a recent or not so recent loss. Talk to the Lord about it. He understands your pain and has promised to help you cope with it.

Ask him to show you what you need to do in order to heal and move in new directions. **Is this your time for solitude or is it time for you to respond to the needs of those around you?** Let Him lead you and give you the strength and confidence you need.

In addition, ask Him what you need to do to prepare your loved ones for the time that you are no longer with them. Surely Randy Pausch has inspired you not only to live your life to the fullest each day, but help those that will miss you most to recover and heal from your absence. Talk to the Lord about this, too, and let Him lead you. He will give you the compassion, wisdom and courage you need to also do this.