

Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart

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Scripture

Proverbs 25:20

Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

Sermon

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Those words brought neither comfort nor support to Kate Bowler. At the age of 34, happily married, engaged in a successful career, the mother of a very young child, she had been recently diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. Kate was suffering in body and in spirit. One can imagine her sense of fear, vulnerability, anger, distress. During her treatment, she heard a great many comments like this one, “Everything happens for a reason,” from people who, one assumes had the best of intentions. But those words did not offer comfort. What reason could there be for her suffering?

How many of us have heard some of these platitudes or cliches, or perhaps in situations like these, have even offered them ourselves?

Here's another one of them: “At least.” “At least you got to have some happy years together...” after someone's beloved spouse has died. Or, to a woman who has suffered a miscarriage, “At least you already have two children.” Like vinegar!

Other things one might say are: “I know how you feel.” Or, “It's for the best.”

In his book, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*, from which I took the sermon title, Kenneth Haugk outlines quite a number of the things that we say to others that diminish or dismiss the pain or the grief or the suffering that people are experiencing. To say, “I know how you feel,” he points out is a matter of speculation. “No you don't!” is an appropriate reaction on the part of sufferer.

Each person is unique and such a statement robs them of their experience. This doesn't mean we need to abandon empathy, not at all. Empathy – or “feeling with” another person – suggests that “first you should find out how the other person feels. There's all the difference, Haugk asserts, between saying, “I know how you feel,” and asking, “How are you feeling?” [1]

He also examines the “it's for the best” statement, and other phrases that communicate much the same thing. “He's at peace now.” “Well, you know she's in a better place.” “They're with Jesus now.” “It's a blessing.” “It's easy to understand why people latch on to this

sentiment when seeking to comfort others," (he says) because "It's cheery. It looks on the bright side. It may even be insightful.

But the problem is that, instead of viewing the situation from the other person's perspective, these statements admonish him or her to see the situation from the caregiver's point of view. Even when such a view might be true, "It's for the best" statements are better left unsaid until the hurting person arrives at the conclusion independently." [2]

Let's look at a few more. There's the "keep a stiff upper lip" statements. Or the "you should, or shouldn't" variety. These would sound like saying to someone who is divorced, "Go on, have a good time and get over it." To a person who has just lost a job, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." (Heard that one before?) Very few people like those statements. They imply that the hurting person needs to get over it, to move on quickly. Haugk expresses it like this: it's an unspoken directive that now it's time for your pain and suffering to be over.

Again, it minimizes the person's feelings and experience:

He tells the story of someone who had to relocate, leaving their hometown of 31 years. She reported hearing these words: "They said I needed to look at it as a new adventure; that I'd enjoy the challenge; that it was past time for me to make move; that I'd love it if I gave it a chance." "You've got to get over it and get on with your life." [3]

Sometimes, those "should" messages can even be right, Haugk affirms. "It might be better for the hurting person to change certain attitudes or take specific actions. The point is that those kinds of words bring more suffering to the hurting person, so it's better not to say them." [4] Don't take away the coat, don't pour on the vinegar.

We've barely touched on the expressions that bring God into the picture.

How about this one: "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." Sounds like something from scripture, doesn't it? It's not. How about this phrase: "It's God's will." This one is, I think, particularly insensitive: "God needed another angel." How can this bring comfort in someone's grief? Such phrases, which often get tossed off rather carelessly, present a God who actively causes someone's suffering. It suggests that one's pain is to God, rather minimal or trivial. When one is suffering, we are asking God why did this happen? Why have you abandoned me? Where are you, God? Where are you?

As C. S. Lewis puts it in his classic, *A Grief Observed*: "When you turn to (Him) God when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence.

The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will be come. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.

What can this mean? Why is (He) God so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?" [5]

Kate Bowler tells of Christians who poured out their own certainty to her about where God was in her experience. Some said that her cancer was all part of God's plan, meant to impart

some important divine lesson. Others offered opinions that were unbelievably judgmental: "Why are you dying?" wrote a man from Idaho. "Some people might think it's cruel for God to let you die so young. But the answer is simple and crystal clear. God is a just God to let you die. This is the consequence for your sin." [6]

To offer any kind of opinions like these, in addition to misrepresenting God's character and intention, imply that a hurting person should not feel the way that they are feeling. These kinds of words, Haugk writes, "are often a way of minimizing or explaining away feelings and hurts. Many things do hurt, and that's reality. To try to lessen hurts by explaining them as part of God's plan is to deny the right that we have as humans and as Christians to feel what we feel." "These are not helpful words," he reports one man saying. "To me, they convey 'I don't know what the heck to say, so just don't cry on me,' or 'Hurry up and accept it, so I don't have to see or hear your pain.'" [7]

This is often the source of our difficulty in caring compassionately for those who are hurting. It is hard to be with someone who is in pain. In the face of someone's suffering we feel discomfort. We feel helpless. We don't know what to say and then struggle with feeling our own inadequacies, which is when those cliches and pat phrases tend to leave our lips. We want to fix it, to make it better. We give advice. We are too directive. We are judgmental. It is difficult to handle the anger of those who are suffering. Even, maybe especially, if they angry with God.

Our tendency can be to try to cheer someone up out of their despair, to propel them to hopefulness. Surely Christians should be hopeful at all times? "Look on the bright side!" we say. "You'll get over this in no time!" "Just trust in God. It will get better." "You're young. You'll marry again." Or how about this one: "You're the strongest person I know. You'll be fine."

Though cheering people up sounds like a good thing to do, such cheer can make people feel... worse. As one woman said, "When I was in the depths of grief, there wasn't any bright side. I didn't want to hear about hope or about anything that might make me 'feel better' because I needed to experience the feelings at the point where I was." And this is important: "Encouragement for me came in that I was not alone in suffering, that people all through Scripture felt the same kinds of feelings that I did, and that friends now were willing to sit with me in the midst of my suffering." [8]

Trying to cheer people up, Haugk points out, is often a way that caregivers try to make themselves feel better. We feel that if we haven't made someone feel better, then we have failed. It becomes about us. We have neglected to acknowledge and accept the reality that the suffering person is recognizing and experiencing. [9]

It is a difficult thing to let go of our desire to fix, to avoid, to not run away from the suffering of others.

A few years ago, our congregation embarked on the process of recruiting and training Stephen Ministers, people who are intentionally trained and commissioned to walk alongside hurting people in our church and community. This book, by the way, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*, was used in our continuing education for the six caregivers. It followed a lengthy

training where our caregivers learned and developed skills that helps them to enter into the suffering of others.

They covered exactly what I've been sharing here: what not to say to a hurting person; how, as caregivers, to deal with those feelings of inadequacy in the face of someone's pain; how – and this can be one of the hardest – to not enter in and try to fix it, to make it better; how recognize our own discomfort in order to offer true comfort and compassion to those who suffer. They learn, most of all, to listen.

This is not to say that we all need special training in order to be compassionate and caring. We all begin with one basic gift: we are human. And we, as Christians, know a God that is so loving that God wants to be present with us. In the incarnation, in Jesus, we see God who longs to live among us, to know our joys, to know our sorrows. And so we too find inspiration and courage to be present to one another.

The word, "comfort" in Greek has the basic meaning of "to call alongside." "Christians by definition," Haugk writes, "are people who receive the comfort of God and are empowered to embody God's comfort in their relationships with one another." [10] Jesus showed care and compassion for those who were hurting. He entered boldly into human suffering. And so we show Christ's love as we care. That, by the way, is the overarching phrase that defines Stephen Ministry: Christ Caring for People Through People.

The way we do this best is by being present. We mourn with those who mourn. We listen to their voices as they narrate their own experience. We acknowledge their suffering and their sorrow. Pain is real. It hurts. It matters.

One of the newest ways our Stephen Ministry has expanded is through the work of our Board of Deacons. When someone in our congregation, or community, has experienced the death of a loved one, they are offered a visit from a deacon and are given the first of a series of four very short, very accessible books. The deacons are going to be discussing the first of these books as part of their continuing education. *Journeying through Grief* is the series; the first book is *A Time to Grieve*. [11]

It begins with encouraging someone to acknowledge their hurt. Sometimes people feel pressure not to grieve... that it is optional, abnormal, or even a sign of weakness. Instead it affirms that it is a normal, natural, and necessary process. To grieve is a part of being human. And how you grieve is uniquely yours. The ways grief shows up in your life is not the same, nor should it be, as anyone else's. And coping methods that you find, ways that you can restore some balance in your life, are also uniquely yours. It encourages people to be themselves and to allow themselves to feel what they feel.

Ken and I have seen this quite often in our ministry: we've heard someone's story and responded with "that's a lot of loss." And people have suddenly realized – Ah! It's okay to recognize this emotional pain. It's okay to grieve this loss.

I confess that my favorite part of our Stephen Ministry training, my favorite part of the Don't Sing Songs book, is the practical part. I like a "to do" list. I'm an achiever – I want to learn

"how to do it right." (And, by the way, sometimes I don't. We don't. None of us gets this perfect.)

How do we care for those who are suffering? It's important to recognize our own anxiety. To admit that we feel helpless. That we, too, are afraid --- afraid of getting so close to another's pain that we hurt too. That we might blunder and make it worse. Simply recognizing that we tend to "sing songs to the heavy heart" is a very, very good start.

The way we begin any deacon visits, or for that matter any pastoral visits, is to pray. Because we never do this alone. When Ken and I were being trained in pastoral care, one of the first things we were taught is the ministry of presence. And it's not just our presence. It's knowing/remembering that God is always in the room first. Our prayer is a reminder that this is not about us and our own anxieties about trying to take away pain or to fix it and make it go away. The Spirit of Christ is holding us and surrounding us --- all of us -- we are "guests in a holy place." [12]

There's a good prayer that begins one of the chapters in Haugk's book that is particularly helpful for Stephen Ministers as they prepare for one of their visits:

Dear Lord, I want my presence to be a help, not a hindrance. Help me make it so. Help me relate to suffering people honestly, being good and true to their needs. Without your watching over my tendencies to evade and avoid, I can't do it, Lord. Thank you for guarding me from my own discomfort. [13]

Our vision is to be a presence that shows God's grace to those who are suffering.

So we avoid avoidance -- we enter in. We meet people where they are -- what they are feeling today they are feeling today, and it is not our "job" to move them somewhere we think they should go. We acknowledge feelings. "Yes, that hurts."

We can all do this. If we cannot there in person, we can send a card. This congregation is good at that. Our deacons send a card, when they can, to those who are on the prayer list which is posted every Wednesday. One can send helpful messages such as: You've been on mind a lot lately. I'm sorry to hear about.... Our hearts go out to you.

At the end of Kate Bowler's book is an Appendix -- right after the one that says "Don't Do This" called "Give this a go; See how it works."

Here's what she writes about words of encouragement and care.

What to say to a hurting person? "I'd love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?" "I'm so grateful to hear about how you're doing and just know that I'm on your team." "Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard."

And her last item listed... *silence.*

Here's how she describes that last one:

"The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy: show up and shut up." [14]

"Friends were willing to sit with me in the midst of my suffering."

So, my friends, let us be the conduits of God's grace in joy and in sorrow. Let us dance with those who dance, mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep.

Spirit.... Open our hearts. Open our hearts.

Sources

- [1] Haugk, Stephen, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who are Suffering* (St. Louis, MO: Stephen Ministries 2004, 2018). Page 105.
- [2] Haugk, 106
- [3] Haugk, 107
- [4] Haugk, 109
- [5] Lewis, C.S., *A Grief Observed*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1961). Page 6.
- [6] Bowler, Kate, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I Have Loved*, (New York, NY: Random House 2018). Page 115.
- [7] Bowler, 113
- [8] Bowler, 117
- [9] Bowler, 120
- [10] Bowler, 29
- [11] *A Time To Grieve*, (St. Louis, MO: Stephen Ministries 2004, 2021).
- [12] Haugk, 35
- [13] Haugk, 113
- [14] Bowler 117