

Some of you know that I was in Disneyland this past week with my family. Each day was filled with memorable moments, including my son turning 16, but one of my favourite moments took place just before we entered the park on the first day.

You are allowed to bring food and drink into Disneyland, but before you enter the park one of the security staff examines the contents of your bag or backpack. I'm not able to do many of rides because of motion-sickness and so I always stash a few books in my bag to read while Naomi and the kids are going from ride to ride.

On the first day, I gave my backpack to a young staffer who looked to be in his early 20's. He took one look inside and said, "*You've got a Bible in there...where are you reading these days?*" I told him that I was reading in 1&2 Samuel; he told me that he was reading the Book of Acts. I went on to explain that I was a pastor of a local church in Vancouver to which he responded, "*That's really cool!*" I can honestly say, no one has ever said that to me before.

He finished checking my bag, gave it back to me and said, "*I'll probably never see you again, but I'll see you in heaven.*"

I walked away with a smile on my face, marvelling at the connection that exists between those who follow Jesus. In one sense this young man was a complete stranger, and in another sense, he's a brother, who is a part of God's world-wide family. I love that about the Church, everywhere you go, you find family, a place to belong. I love that about North Shore Alliance, and about you—you're a part of my family and I'm a part of yours. What binds us together isn't shared genetics, it's the common salvation we've been invited into through Jesus.

I'm grateful to be with you this morning and I want to begin my sermon by brining you back to my Grade 10 school year, 1988-89. It was a big year for me in terms of significant, emotional experiences; I want to share three brief vignettes with you.

Vignette #1: After dating for more than a year, my girlfriend and I broke up. It may not sound like much, but it was my first experience of a relationship that just "ended;" Michelle and I were dating...and then we weren't. Our enjoyment of one another was replaced with enmity, the warmth of friendship utterly gone. We went from spending time together to trying to avoid one another, which was difficult, because we attended the same church. Every time I saw her I was reminded that something had broken between us.

Vignette #2: When I was a young boy, I made a decision to follow Jesus, but it was in Grade 10 that I was baptized. It was on a Sunday morning in May that I stood before the Church and expressed my desire to follow Jesus for the rest of my life. Being baptized was one of those pivotal, line-in-the sand, moments in my life; Jesus before me, the world behind me, no turning back—that decision continues to mark me to today. Both then, and now, it was a day of great joy.

Vignette #3: A few weeks after my baptism, my grandmother was rushed to hospital; her heart was failing—again. Many years before, my grandmother needed surgery to replace a valve in her heart; the replacement valve came from a pig's heart. As a young boy it always struck me as funny, and weird, that my Grandma had part of a pig in her heart.

Ten years or so later, that precious pig's valve began to wear out; the valve needed to be replaced but the doctor's determined that my

Grandma wasn't strong enough to survive the surgery. While my Grandma's passing wasn't my first experience of death, it was my first experience of grief. She loved me, and I loved her.

Whenever we visited her house, she always smelled of the kitchen, and she wouldn't let us get in the door without a kiss. She was a loving, strong, kind woman—and she was gone.

The funeral arrangements were made within the week; a viewing on Friday evening and the service on Saturday. I can remember standing in the back of the funeral home on Friday night, my grandmother's body on display in a casket. I had been to a viewing before but never for someone that I had known and loved.

In life, my grandmother was warm and kind, she smelled like cookies and fried pork chops. Staring into the casket, there could be no doubt—it was my grandmother's body—but it didn't seem real, somehow, this lifeless corpse couldn't be her. Sometimes it takes awhile for our heart to catch up with what our mind knows to be true.

After standing in front of the casket, I went to the back of the room and watched other family members take their moment—cousins, aunts, uncles, and my Dad. I had seen my Dad cry before—a tear or two, a single track down his cheek—but not like this: a river running, his body heaving, my uncle's arm around his shoulder.

I didn't like what I was seeing—pain, grief, loss. I didn't like what I was feeling—anguish of the soul. I wonder, *what's your relationship with grief?* Have you embraced grief as a part of life, or, do you try to ignore it, deny it, or run from it?

When we gather on Sunday, week by week, by way of song we typically express joy in who God is and what He is done for us. One might get the impression that Christians *are* always happy, or that in light of what God has done we should always *be* happy. But you and I know different. Our lives are marked by joy and pain, by gains and losses, by desires fulfilled, and, crushing disappointments. When it comes to songs of joy, we have smorgasbord to choose from, but where are the songs of sadness? The songs of lament? You find them in the Psalms—David wrote many of them—but do we find them in Church?

In life, we can't move on unless we mourn and lament what's been lost; grief serves an important purpose—there is no healing without grieving. This morning we will fix our eyes on 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1; these two chapters chronicle the death of Saul and Jonathan, and, the grief of David for them. I want to encourage you to turn with me to 1 Samuel 31; if you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page _____.

1 Samuel 31:1-6, *“Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell dead on Mount Gilboa. 2 The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. 3 The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.*

4 Saul said to his armour-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.” But his armour-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. 5 When the armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and

died with him. 6 So Saul and his three sons and his armour-bearer and all his men died together that same day.”

For his entire reign, Israel had been at war with the Philistines; Saul won more battles than he lost but this was the day of his final battle. Saul was mortally wounded, three of his sons already dead around him, and he knew that torture awaited if he fell into enemy hands. And so, in the end, Saul fell on his own sword and died.

2 Samuel 1:11-12, “**11** Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. **12** They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.”

Vs. 17-27, “**17** David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, **18** and he ordered that the people of Judah be taught this lament of the bow (it is written in the Book of Jashar): **19** ‘A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen!

20 Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon—two of the chief Philistine cities—lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.

21 Mountains of Gilboa—the place where Saul and Jonathan died—may you have neither dew nor rain, may no showers fall on your terraced fields. For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.

22 From the blood of the slain, from the flesh of the mighty,

the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied. 23 Saul and Jonathan—in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. 24 Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.

25 How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights. **26** I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women. **27** How the mighty have fallen! The weapons of war have perished!”

This act of lament should strike us as odd, should it not? David sang a song of praise about Saul. Wasn’t Saul the enemy of David?

In one sense, Saul’s death meant the end to David’s troubles. Saul made David’s life miserable; he had been running, hiding in caves, and living in enemy occupied territory for close to 10 years. With Saul’s death, David was *free*. But upon hearing the news of Saul’s death, David composed a tribute to the former King and commanded all of Judah to learn it and sing it with him. *What’s going on here?*

It’s fair to say that David had a complicated relationship with Saul. David was Saul’s personal musician, then giant-killer, then General, then son-in-law, and finally enemy. But no matter how much Saul dishonoured, hated, or hunted David, David didn’t reciprocate. The hatred was only one-way; it consumed Saul, but never worked its way into David’s heart.

How was this possible? How was David not consumed with hatred, burning with anger, on the look-out for revenge? There's no secret really, all along the way David embraced grief; his private lament for the things he suffered, made his public acts of honour possible. When it came to disappointment, injustice, or loss, David didn't ignore, deny, or run from his troubles—he regularly brought this to God in prayer.

Psalm 142 is one of the Psalms that David wrote while living in a cave—no doubt on the run from Saul. *“I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble. When my spirit grows faint within me, it is You who watch over my way. In the path where I walk people have hidden a snare for me. Look and see, there is no one at my right hand; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life. I cry to you, Lord; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’*

Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.”

David never lived in denial; he hadn't convinced himself that Saul was a “good guy.” David was in touch with what was happening to him, and he brought all of it to God in prayer. Prayer kept him

looking to God, depending on God, hoping in God. And God kept David from becoming an embittered, empty husk of a person; God kept David humble, merciful, forgiving.

Eugene Peterson writes, “Seventy percent of the Psalms are laments...David repeatedly faced loss, disappointment, death. But he neither avoided, denied, nor soft-pedalled any of those difficulties. He faced everything and he prayed everything. David's laments are part and parcel of the craggy majesty and towering dignity of David's life.”¹

What we see in David—in his embrace of grief—points forward to fulfilment in the coming of Jesus. Peterson notes that the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—kept the humanity of Jesus firmly in front of their audiences by regularly introducing Him as the “*Son of David*”. He writes, “The entire meaning of the incarnation is that God enters our human condition, embraces it, comes to where we are to save us.”²

Jesus knew firsthand the disappointments, losses, and grief we bear.

In becoming human, He suffered the loss of majesty, descending from heaven to earth. When He entered into itinerant ministry He lost a place to call home, a familiar bed to rest His head, and the comfort of familiar relationships. Everywhere He went, He was given labels to wear: trouble-maker, heretic, glutton, or drunkard. He lost any sense of privacy, being dogged by crowds everywhere He went.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality For Everyday Christians*, 115.

² Peterson, 9.

Sometimes as we experience difficulty, we say to ourselves, “*It is what it is.*” It’s a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with the losses and disappointments we encounter, but in effect, it’s an attempt to shield ourselves from the pain we experience—to minimize it or brush it aside. Jesus didn’t do that.

There’s a poignant moment in Mark 7; it’s easy to miss unless you’re paying attention. In vs. 32 we were told that “*some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him... ‘Be opened!’ At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.*”

Did you hear it? Jesus looked up to heaven, uttered a deep sigh—a groan of sadness—before speaking a word of healing. Better than anyone, Jesus knows the pain of the way things are because He knows perfectly the way things are supposed to be. A deep sigh, a groan of sadness; His sigh reminds us that it won’t always be this way.

In John 11, we see Jesus with Martha and Mary—two sisters who had just lost their brother to death. Jesus had been in their home many times before—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, His good friends. When He saw the crowd weeping, mourning, grieving, He was deeply moved in the spirit and troubled. And when they brought Him to Lazarus’ tomb, Jesus broke down and wept.

Jesus also knew the pain of betrayal. He was abandoned by close friends, unjustly arrested, falsely accused, and sentenced for a crime

He didn’t commit. He suffered the shame of being stripped naked in public and He was beaten within an inch of His life.

And the question is why? Why would Jesus submit Himself to this kind of suffering? *Was it not because of love?* God the Son came from heaven to earth so that He could be with us in our grief, and ultimately, to bear humanity’s grief on the cross. All that is wrong with the world, all that is broken, and painful, and unjust, and evil—this He bore as He bled and died. He came to identify with us in our pain and loss that He might redeem us from our pain and loss. On the day He returns, death and dying, mourning, and crying will be no more.

Application: But until that day comes, we need a way of being that can sustain us in the middle of disappointment and loss. In the time the remaining, I want to share a few thoughts about how to go about embracing our grief. Here’s the first:

1. We need to admit that denying our disappointments only delays the inevitable; drowning our sorrows in distraction is equally unhelpful. **We can’t move on unless we lament what’s been lost; grief serves an important purpose—there is no healing without grieving.** Without God, without lament, I shudder to think what David would have become. *Without God, without embracing grief, what will become of us?*

All of us make our way through life with a set of assumptions, or expectations, about the way things should be. And if your experience is like mine, reality often falls short of our expectations.

illus: Disneyland is billed as being “the happiest place on earth,” the problem is that there is no place happy enough to erase all of our disappointments. For the last four years, my daughter has been dreaming about going Disneyland, but after building it up in her mind and heart, the experience wasn’t all that she imagined it would be.

The scenery was beautiful, the rides were wonderful, but in her dreams she wasn’t weaving through thousands of people, waiting in long line ups, or sharing a hotel room with her brother.

At one point, we were walking through a gift shop and I spied a small boy, about 4 years old, just ahead of us. He was walking through the gift shop, pointing in every direction and saying, “*I want that, I want that, I want that.*” Whether of our own making or not, we all experience disappointment.

And we all experience loss. On the day I was married, I spoke the following words: *Naomi, I take you to be my wife, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.* But here’s the thing, I wasn’t thinking about the *worse*, or *poorer*, or *sickness*, or *death*. Until it happens, we don’t envision our spouse being diagnosed with cancer or going through chemo. We don’t picture our spouse with dementia, beginning to forget, slowly slipping away from us. And yet these kinds of losses are a very real part of life—some of you are facing these realities as I speak.

Divorce has described as a kind of “living death.” When someone dies, they are lost to us, we are separated; we cannot go to them and they cannot come to us. In a divorce, a person is lost to us, we are separated, but it is a separation of choice; we may want to go to them, but they do not want to return to us, or vice versa. It’s a pain like no other.

Have you experienced the death of a dream, an opportunity, or job? Perhaps you’ve encountered the loss of physical or emotional well-being, or one of your most important relationships.

One day, in the light of Jesus’ return, all of our troubles will flee, but until that day comes, embracing grief is a part of being a person after God’s own heart. A person after God’s own heart has build their life upon His strength, love, and faithfulness. When trouble comes we turn *to* Him, not *away* from Him. We pray our disappointment and pain to Him for He is the Father of Compassion and the God of all Comfort.³

Jesus sees you, He knows you, He understands all of the losses you’ve experienced, and He cares. But He’s more than an empathetic friend, He can comfort, encourage, strengthen, and heal. So look to heaven, and bring your deep sigh to Jesus.

Here’s the second thought:

³ 2 Corinthians 1:3.

2. The process of grieving involves opening our heart to God, and to others.

The Bible says we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.⁴ This is an important truth for us all. When we feel like we are at the bottom, we rejoice with those who rejoice knowing that our current difficulty will not last forever—we place our hope in the mercy and goodness of God.

In the same way, we mourn with those who mourn. We bear the burdens of others, and walk with those in pain. We mourn with others knowing that the day will come when we will rely upon the strength and compassion of others.

We live in a culture of denial and distraction, where numbing ourselves from disappointment, pain, and loss is seen to be a good thing. Headphones in our ears, the glowing light of a screen...there are so many ways to ignore what is happening around us or in us. We don't want to think, feel, or remember—it's too painful. We keep ourselves busy, or medicated; we pretend things are better than they are.

For many, an Instagram or Facebook account becomes a way of constructing an alternate reality...our pictures portray fun, adventure, a well-ordered life, but inside we may be dying. We have all of these ways to connect, but are we really connected? Are we open and vulnerable? Do people really know our pain? I've heard it said that most people are only three really good questions away from crying. *If*

I could sit down with you and ask you three questions, what pain or loss might you share?

As I think about our church, and who we are becoming, I'm encouraged to see signs of being a place where people can be honest about their disappointment, pain, and loss. It's ok to not be ok. We're all on a journey towards healing and wholeness, all of need the healing grace of God, and, the loving embrace of the community. May God be with us, and give us everything we need for the road ahead.

⁴ Romans 12:15.