

viewpoint

Embracing the pain opens avenues for ministry

The death of 24-year-old Joey McCreight exploded like a bombshell in our church family Feb. 8. For me and me, it has been almost like losing one of our own children. We have been close friends with the McCreights ever since we came to church. Joey's mother, Barb, has our youth center for nine years. Mike, Joey's father, is active on several levels in our church. Joey was in our men's fourth grade Sunday School class and my confirmation class. This was more than just ministry to a family who had suffered a tragic loss. This was personal.

When something is that painful, we tend to try to avoid it. The old saying about the country doctor has the doctor not lifting his sore arm. The doctor says, "Does that hurt?" The patient says, "Yes." The doctor says, "Then I won't do that!" Unfortunately, we can't just avoid the pain of losing someone we love. We use various strategies to anesthetize the pain: alcohol, television, ultimately destructive. Alcohol, television, emotional denial, or obsessive busyness with trivial things are all ultimately fruitless ways to deal with the "elephant in the corner"



Bud Reeves



The Shepherd's Staff

By William O. "Bud" Reeves

that just won't go away. We have to embrace the pain.

Grief done well is an act of trust. No relationship can become deep unless you trust the other person enough to be honest and open, no matter what you are feeling. When you can lay it all out and unload, knowing that he or she will still accept you and love you even when you're out of control, then you have a deep friendship.

We need that kind of friendship with God. To embrace the pain of grief, we need to trust God enough to pour out our hearts to him and get it all out of our system. Sometimes it's gratitude and praise and cries for help; sometimes it's fear and anger and bewilderment. It doesn't matter; God can take it. He will continue to accept us and love us no matter what sort of weakness we reveal. And like a good counselor, he keeps all conversations confidential!

Grief also involves trust because as we descend into the depths, we need to trust that God will hold and keep us and ultimately bring us through. Grief is like crossing an icy river.

There is no way to tiptoe in. You just have to take a deep breath, plunge in, feel the pain, and keep stroking until you come out on the other side. The good news is, we swim with a life preserver — our faith and the community of the church. Though the journey is hard and unpleasant, we do not need to fear drowning. God and our faithful friends will keep us afloat.

The miracle of grief is that we do not drown in it. In fact, good things can come out of it. God can become more real through the grief experience — not just as an abstract concept, but as a constant companion and confidante. Death forces us to choose what we believe and underscores the critical importance of a foundation in faith — or you can always go with meaninglessness, despair and bitterness. How do people confront death without a personal God, the hope of heaven, and the support of a church? My heart breaks for them on a whole different level.

We can find out through a time of loss how much people care. Nobody came to love the McCreights just because Joey died. The affection and

the respect were already there. But outpouring in their loss was overwhelming — the food, the visits, the helpful activities. We don't tell even one we love every day how we feel; we don't need to. But a bad situation allows us to affirm our love in concrete ways, and it helps the pain become bearable.

Grief can also open up avenues for ministry. Tragedies offer incredible opportunities for ministries of compassion. Beyond that, when anyone experiences a loss and the recovery that faith provides, it may call us to serve God in new and exciting ways. Many times people who have had difficult experiences with sickness or death find that God opens up wellsprings of compassion in them. And that's good.

I wish the pain of grief ended when they put the body in the ground, but it doesn't work that way. It's a long process, and most of us are coping with it at various levels of intensity all the time. That's why it's important to keep the support and encouragement constant. Dealing with the Final Enemy is one of the most important ministries the church does. As we embrace the pain, we also celebrate because we are, after all, a people who believe in the resurrection.

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'I saw you coming ... and shut the door' — words of welcome

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"Ole Saint Peter, can't you see me coming, hurry up and open the door!" are words from an old spiritual that we hear, as the Lenten season does, that we are mortal and we are living a transitory life here in this place. The one thing that we do not want to hear at heaven's gate is old St. Peter saying, "I saw you coming — and I shut the door."

Some observations of life on this earth make me wonder.

Some of us get mad at the preacher and quit giving to the church!

Some of us get mad at Bob or a friend and quit going to church! We don't remember why but we are still mad.

Someone upset us when we were a

teen-ager and we have not been back since.

Some of us play pocketbook politics with the church. You don't do it just the way I want it done and I won't give you any more money.

Someone insulted us 20 years ago, we can't remember who or why, but we ain't going back to that or any church

anymore.

Ever wonder how heaven's keepers would respond to our lame and feeble reasons for not being all there?

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FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE By Mike Morgan

