

“Grief Observed”

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Based upon Luke 7:1- 11-17; 2 Cor. 1:3-11

There’s a hole in the world that’s growing bigger each day. It’s a hole made up of billions of smaller holes found in human beings all over the globe, a hole created by grief. Romanian-born sculptor Albert György shows us what it looks like in his sculpture called “Melancolie,” which is on the bulletin cover today.¹ If you’ve ever lost a loved one, you know what that hole feels like all too well. But other losses can make you feel gutted in this way too. The loss of a job can make a hole, as can the loss of a relationship, a pet, a business, a home, and a way of life. Losing one’s mobility, mental acuity, innocence, confidence, hope, and faith can do it too. Anything we cherish can leave a hole when it’s gone, which is why the collective hole is so big in the world right now. In the past year we have all lost something. Some have lost far more than others, but I don’t think there is a soul who hasn’t lost something important. Collectively the loss is huge, but unlike in other times, when big losses caused by war or natural disaster have birthed big reactions, this loss is one which many are still trying to ignore. There are lots of reasons for this. It’s too depressing, too incomprehensible, too frightening to focus on what has happened and could happen. But perhaps the biggest reason is cultural. Even in the Before Times, in our culture we didn’t like talking about loss, grief, and death. We devote huge amounts of energy and money to avoiding all three, and when we can’t, we acknowledge them as fleetingly as possible. We apologize when we can’t help from crying, even when crying is appropriate, and criticize or look away when we feel other people have grieved too long.

Right now, everyone is grieving, so you can’t really look away. But we still aren’t talking about it much, and many aren’t even allowing themselves to recognize their grief or to weep in the privacy of their homes. Psychologists say this is because we are all suffering from “psychic numbness.”² That just means that the bigger the problems and the greater the loss, the less our brains and hearts can cope with processing and feeling them. We can be and usually are upset when we see a picture of a single child in trouble, and continue to be when the picture shows two children. But the more people you put in the picture, the less we care. There have been studies that show this.³ It’s not a reaction limited to the callous and cruel; all human beings do this to some extent because our brains aren’t wired to process human tragedies *en masse*. We can’t internalize such numbers and feel helpless in the face of them.

What does it mean that more than 425,000 people have died in the United States from COVID, and 2 million around the world, for example? Is that a lot compared to other diseases? Is it a large percentage of the world’s population? Since most of us don’t walk around with those kinds of statistics in our heads, I tried to find some comparisons this week. 400,000 is the

¹ See *11 Sublime Sculpture by Romanian Artist Albert György*, Wooarts.com, at <https://wooarts.com/albert-gyorgy/nggallery/image/albert-gyorgy-sculpture-wooarts-01/>

² See Wan, William, and Shammis, Brittany, “*A Numbness Over Deaths*,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Section E, Jan. 19, 2021.

³ *Ibid* at E5, referring to the studies of psychologist Paul Slovic.

equivalent of 2,899 737-plane crashes.⁴ If that actually happened— the equivalent of 8 a day— we would be shocked, but less than 3,000 still seems like a relatively small number. 425,000 is about twice the number of service people who died during the Revolutionary War.⁵ That makes the COVID number seem bigger, but the Revolution happened so long ago that that comparison does not make the current loss feel any more immediate. But what if I said 400,000 is more than 40,000 9-11s?⁶ What if I told you that it's the equivalent of Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Tulsa, or Minneapolis suddenly being erased off the map, and soon will be the equivalent of losing Atlanta?⁷ What do you feel then?

The numbers make me think of the box office smash *Avengers: Endgame*, which tells the story about how Earth coped with the catastrophe caused in an earlier movie by an evil villain named Thanos.⁸ He snapped his fingers while wearing a powerful magical glove, and in so doing, erased half of all living things in the universe. One minute they were there, the next they were dust— people, birds, animals. When I first saw *Endgame*, it was because I was being a dutiful mom taking my son to the popular superhero movie of the day. I was not a Marvel groupie then. But I ended up loving it more than my son did because it was a surprisingly deep and insightful study of grief. What do you do with a large-scale loss like that? Some of the characters in the movie respond by trying to control everything around them to prevent anything else bad from happening. Some give up all pretense of coping, and spend hours getting drunk and playing video games. Some lash out in anger and violence, while others lead support groups encouraging people to try to make something of their lives because they are survivors; still others give up everything they once cared about just to spend time with family. The movie's point is that all of these responses are grief responses. Unacknowledged grief doesn't go away on its own. It always comes out somehow, if not in tears, then in other ways. It comes out in over or under-eating, in depression or anxiety, in rage, relationship troubles, or the inability to move forward, sleep, or feel.

I am preaching on the subject today for this very reason, not because I want to think about it anymore than you do. I don't. The numbers frighten me. I didn't preach on grief all last year because like you I didn't want to focus on loss— it was too much of a downer when we are all trying to be hopeful. But I believe that many of the problems we experienced last year, from the riots to the masking debates, to the politics of antagonism, were grief-inspired events. So, if we truly want to move forward into a new and better year, then we need to acknowledge the holes in us so our feelings will stop leaking out in other destructive ways. We need to “observe”

⁴ Richards, Sarah Elizabeth, “*Why our minds can't make sense of COVID-19's enormous death toll*,” NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, Sept. 29, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/09/why-minds-brains-cannot-make-sense-coronavirus-enormous-death-toll>. This would be the equivalent of 8 such plane crashes a day since the pandemic began.

⁵ *America's Wars: U.S. Casualties and Veterans*, Infoplease.com, <https://www.infoplease.com/us/military/americas-wars-us-casualties-and-veterans>

⁶ Although slightly fewer than 3,000 were killed immediately during 9-11, more than 6000 were injured to varying degrees, so for hypothetical purposes I used 10,000 injured or killed for that catastrophe. See Wikipedia, cf. 9-11, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_September_11_attacks

⁷ Wikipedia, cf. List of United States cities by population, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_cities_by_population

⁸ Russo, Anthony, and Joe Russo. 2019. *Avengers: Endgame*. United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

our grief, as C.S. Lewis did in his book by that name, written after his wife died, because that is the first step toward moving into a new chapter with hope.⁹

For people of faith, such observation inevitably raises questions about God, like “Why?” and “How could you?” and “Where were you?” The Bible doesn’t answer these questions in a truly satisfying way— we might as well acknowledge that, too. But it does speak to human grief in a variety of ways. Consider the story from *Luke* today about the widow of Nain, for example. It begins with a death, well actually, with two. The first to die was a widow’s son. His death was marked by public grieving. A whole crowd of people were following his mother as they carried the son’s body outside the city for disposal. But the second death went unacknowledged. It was the death of the widow’s security, the death of her hope, happiness, and love. Widows in those days depended on family to take care of them. Without a man in the picture, she was doomed— at best to begging, slavery, or prostitution, at worst to death. So, as she walked, weeping over the loss of her son, I imagine that widow silently saying good-bye to her own life in the process as well.

But Jesus was not about to allow two people to die that day. When he and his followers encountered the funeral procession leaving the city as they were trying to enter it, Jesus stopped to address the situation. He told the widow not to cry, miraculously resuscitated her son, and then promptly gave him back to her. Notice how little Jesus focuses on the dead man in this story? This isn’t a story about him. It’s a story about the widow, and how Jesus brought her back to life. He didn’t ask her about her faith or the circumstances of her son’s death. He was just moved by her grief and helped her. That’s important to keep in mind because otherwise this story, like all the other stories of Jesus’ raising people from the dead in the Bible, creates more theological problems than it solves. “Why, if Jesus has the power to bring people back, does he not bring back our loved ones?” they prompt us to ask. “Why doesn’t he save them too?”

Years ago, I saw an absolutely exquisite French film called *Ponette*, which addresses these questions through the eyes of a four-year old girl whose mother is killed in a car accident.¹⁰ It’s totally worth dealing with subtitles to watch it— but have a box of Kleenex ready if you do. Ponette’s father sends her to go live with her aunt for a while, who tells her, in a misguided attempt to comfort her, that all will be well because Jesus came back from the dead. The girl infers from this that Jesus was going to bring her mother back from the dead too. She spends hours and days waiting in a field for her to return, only to be crushed and confused when her mother remains dead and gone. Then Ponette is sent to a boarding school where a Jewish friend tells her that maybe her mom didn’t come back because she wasn’t a faithful child of God. To be faithful you have to have endured many trials, she explains. So, she devises all kinds of obstacles that Ponette must conquer on the playground to make her worthy. But still her mother does not return. The movie goes on following this little girl on her quest to understand something that is ultimately impossible to understand, the “Why?” of death when you believe in a loving God.

⁹ See Lewis, C.S., *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins Pub. 1961).

¹⁰ *Ponette*. Written and Directed by Jacque Doillon. (BAC Films, Sept. 25, 1996).

There is no answer that is satisfactory to that why, but in the stories of how Jesus interacted with the grieving, we get a glimpse of how we can survive great losses and get through our grief to a new chapter with hope, even without a miracle. In Luke's gospel, the answer to "how?" is summed up by scholars in the phrase "the soteriology of with-ness."¹¹ All that obtuse phrase means is that whereas other gospels focus on salvation in Christ being brought about through the forgiveness of sins, or through the profession of belief in Christ, or through Jesus' death and resurrection, in *Luke*, salvation comes from God's ability in Christ to restore people to community and be with us when we suffer. Again and again in *Luke*, Jesus brings people out of isolation caused by illness, grief, or hurtful social norms, and restores them into community. His death on the cross is the ultimate illustration of that "with-ness." Although his death does not prevent our own, or prevent our suffering, through it, Jesus proclaims that God is with us in these experiences. God understands fear, loss, and pain. God understands inequity, injustice, and hopelessness. On the cross, Jesus had a hole the size of the one in the sculpture because in that moment even he felt betrayed and abandoned by God. But in that same moment, God in heaven also had a hole, caused by losing a "child" before his time.

The pastor I grew up with as a child, Jack Miller, described God's with-ness this way in his book called The Healing Power of Grief: "One of the unspoken problems of those who survive a collision with the ugliness of reality is there seems to be no place to register our complaint. We're infested with horrible feelings but we have no place to bring them.... Life dishes out life with no respect to persons. For believers, our only consolation is that God Himself took on the absurdity of it all, innocently, and had the spikes of life's thorns and nails drive through him. He hung there first so we do not have to hang there alone."¹²

The Gospel proclaims that God is with us always, in good times and bad. Although we would like God to take the suffering away, God chooses instead to console us by meeting us in it. We are not alone in our grief, not alone in our fear, not alone in our numbness. But as Paul explains in his second letter to the Corinthians, salvation through "with-ness" doesn't stop there. As God is with us in our grief and suffering, so we are supposed to be with others: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God," he wrote. (2 Cor. 4). That word that Paul uses eight times in five verses, "consolation," comes from the same root *parakleo* that Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit, who he said was the "Comforter" or "Consoler," the *paraklete*. His point was that the Holy Spirit is with us to offer comfort in our grief, and then also works through us, to enable us to comfort others by sharing our own stories. This is another reason we need to talk about our grief, even if doing so makes us uncomfortable. When we name our own pain, we open ourselves up to receiving the blessing of the Spirit, and in so doing, become better able to help others with their pain. God's ministry of with-ness continues through us.

¹¹ Karris, Robert J., "Luke's Soteriology of With-ness." CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION 12(6), 1985, 346-352.

¹² Miller, Jack Silvey, The Healing Power of Grief (New York: Wieser & Wieser, Inc., 1995), 113.

The daughter of old friends of mine who run the resort in the Adirondacks I have visited for decades, has an incredible ministry of with-ness like this, which she spoke about recently in a TED talk.¹³ Caroline Catlin discovered in her twenties that she has a brain tumor. It is one of the kinds that you can beat back for a while, but never defeat permanently. So, right when she should have been exploring her dreams and planning her future, she was confronted with the truth that many of her dreams, including the dream of growing old, would never be realized. The grief she felt was profound. In her talk she describes it not like a hole, but like a dark, heavy blanket wrapped around her that she couldn't remove. For a while it almost suffocated her. But then she was given a chance to use her photography skills to help others. She was invited to take pictures for families who were spending their last hours with loved ones before they died. Many of the dying were children. Caroline met with the families, and then took photos of those last sacred moments where the world falls away and all that is left is love and grief, so that the families would have pictures of their loved ones and that moment forever. In the process of doing this incredibly hard job, watching others die too young while knowing that her own time was limited, Caroline found a consolation she didn't expect, in the form of the love she witnessed in those rooms; it felt eternal. Not a religious person, Caroline didn't describe the experience as Spirit-inspired. But in her talk, it is clear that she has experienced the grace of God's Spirit, and that through her work and presence, the families she photographed did as well. She says in her talk that the love she saw in those moments wove rainbow colors into her dark blanket of grief, and that has made all the difference in her ability to carry it, while making the most of life while she has it.

A wise Swedish proverb states: "Shared joy is double joy; shared sorrow is half-sorrow."¹⁴ We cannot take away everyone's pain and sorrow, but we can share it. This is what God does with us and calls us to do with each other. So even though it is uncomfortable, we must talk about the grief we all carry. We must tell the stories of the people young and old, strong and fragile who have died because of this horrible virus. We must shed tears together about lost jobs, and lost relationships with school friends, lost freedom, and lost dreams. To do so is not to wallow in despair, it is to begin to heal. We are living through a very difficult time, all of us. The way to get through it is not to pretend that all is well, but to acknowledge that it isn't, and console one another as God consoles us. May the Spirit strengthen us as we do this, so that together we can fill the holes in the world with love. Amen.

¹³ "Caroline Catlin," at <https://tedxseattle.com/speakers/caroline-catlin/>; TED talk is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiXeH-NPW1o>.

¹⁴ As quoted at *Swedish Proverbs, Old Sayings and Customary Wisdom*, The History of Art and The Curious Lives of Famous Painters, https://www.historyofpainters.com/sweden_proverbs.htm.