

## GRIEF, GRATITUDE, GOOD NEWS

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

(Sunday after the death of our Lead Pastor Dr. Doyle Sager)

WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/grief-gratitude-good-news](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/grief-gratitude-good-news)

Pastors touch our lives in so many ways. They are with us in life's most important and holy moments. They stand with us as we exchange vows of love and commitment to spouses. They are often one of the first to welcome our babies into this world and, in Doyle's case with a long tenure in one place, to one day, when they are ready, baptize those same babies and officiate their weddings and welcome the babies of those babies. They are there when we or someone we love is sick. They are near during our final moments. They stand by our side as we lay to rest those we love, bringing comfort.

Most importantly, pastors - pastors like Doyle Sager - stand Sunday after Sunday faithfully proclaiming the Word of God. Pastors help lead us to recognize God's love for us and our need for God, they patiently and faithfully nurture our relationship with Christ. They pray for us, hurt with us, hope for us, challenge us, and they love us ... through all the ups and downs of life. They're family. Doyle is family. We grieve as those who have lost a very dear and beloved member of our family.

When Hannah and I planned our current sermon series, *Known in the Unknown*, we were aware this year held many potential unknowns. We knew we would need to remember more than ever we are known by God, loved by God, remembered by God even when we cannot understand what is happening, when we cannot see what is coming. We had hoped, and we had prayed as you have that this – the death of our pastor and friend - would not be one of them. Yet, here we are together, known in this difficult unknown.

I want to invite us today to lean into three things during this unknown. **Those three things are grief, gratitude, and Good News.**

*“Why Doyle? Why did this happen to such a good and faithful man? He didn't deserve it.”* I have heard these questions more than a few times over the past months. And I understand these feelings. I've had my own hard conversations with God these past months as some of you have. In keeping with his honesty and transparency, Doyle shared in a recent article that he, too, was wrestling with God asking, “How could God let this happen? What about all my plans? Didn't God care?”

In that article, Doyle reminded us our prayers do not necessarily alter the universe nor tip outcomes in the way we wish they would go. What those honest cries did was allow Doyle to dump lots of words and pain and anger from his weary heart and spirit into the strong and tender hands of God. And that was cleansing. That is part of the miraculous power of prayer.

Over the years, Doyle has taught us that grief is not something to be feared or ignored. It may be delayed, but it cannot be denied. As Doyle once said about avoiding grief, it is “like placing a napkin over a volcano.”

We need to be very honest in these days about our grief. God welcomes our grief. God expects and understands our sorrow. It is a reflection of our deep love for Doyle, an expression of our deep pain at missing Doyle. Honest words of grief and pain, or laments, are the source of an entire book in the Bible and many of the psalms. It shows our laments matter to God.

Life is full of paradoxes and suffering, inequity and unanswered prayer. Jesus joins us in our suffering. Jesus, well acquainted with grief, leads us through this darkest valley because he has already walked it, and he knows the way through. There is no way around. We must walk through, but we do not walk alone. The Lord, our Shepherd, will lead us through.

As we lean into our grief, we also need to lean into gratitude.

In times like these, it is tempting to go toward scarcity. I have found myself there many times. There wasn't enough time. There weren't enough thank you's; not enough I love you's. Simply not enough. But would there ever be enough? The caution for us is this: ***when lost in the not enoughts, we miss all that is.***

Gratitude is a gift from God that sets our hearts on abundance rather than scarcity. We have an abundance of precious memories with Doyle. We have an abundance of stories to tell of Doyle's impact on our lives. We have an abundance of love when we reflect on how well Doyle has loved us. We have an abundance of God's kindness and goodness for the time God blessed us with Doyle as our pastor and friend.

It would not be right today if I did not include a quote from one of Doyle's faith heroes, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an anti-Nazi theologian and pastor during World War II. In fact, Doyle found it amusing that some of our young people had friendly wagers on whether or not Doyle would quote Bonhoeffer in the sermon of the day. So, I offer these words from Bonhoeffer, written from his prison cell to family on Christmas Eve, 1943, fifteen months before his own death by execution:

*There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve — even in pain — the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and fuller the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. **But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy.** One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.<sup>1</sup>*

Gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. Our thankfulness for the gift of Doyle will be used by God to transform our pain. Our focus on abundance over the scarcity will be a balm to our grief as we walk through the valley together with our shepherd.

While gratitude for Doyle is a gift to us, bringing comfort, our gratitude for God is truly where our hope is renewed and where Doyle would direct us. We recall the words of Lamentations 3:22-24 which read,

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”*

How grateful we are today for God who loves us and knows us, a Creator extravagant in mercy and great in faithfulness, a Savior victorious over death and despair through the resurrection hope of Jesus Christ.

**During these days of unknown, we lean into grief. We lean into gratitude. And, most importantly, we lean into the Good News.**

For so many, Doyle has been with you in some of your hardest moments, moments like these as we contend with death. In the depths of our grief, he proclaimed over and over for us the hope found in Christ and the power of the resurrection life. He didn't offer those words to give us a false hope or to serve as a crutch during our hour of need. Doyle believed every word he said, every word he proclaimed, every word he offered up out of love during our own moments of grief. And these words are the very words Doyle has clung to himself these past few months as promises for him, God's child, God's beloved.

In Doyle's 2018 Easter sermon titled, "[Resurrection - Love's Great Reversal](#)", he shared these words. *In Acts 10:39-40, Peter preaches about God's love as the great reversal. Evil looked like it was going to win. Evil looked like it was going to carry the day. And then, v. 40, that small word: **but**. So important. But God had other plans. Love's great reversal. The resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals God's heart for us. Despite all we see around us—cemeteries, cancer treatments, war, terrorism, hate—we believe in Christ's victory over death. Jesus is alive.*

We believe in Christ's victory over death. Doyle devoted his life to proclaiming this Good News. He walked all kinds of difficult and painful journeys with others and on his own. Yet despite all those trials, his faith in God not only remained, it was fortified. He found all he believed to be true and, not only true, but worthy of the cost.

In Jesus's final words of reassurance, comfort, and encouragement to his disciples in the upper room before his death, he said to them, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Take heart, friends. Be encouraged, church. Let us lean into grief. Lean into gratitude. And most importantly, lean into the Good News of Love's great reversal. By entering into our world and suffering alongside of us, Jesus offers certain hope that surpasses any sorrow and suffering this world throws at us. This is the hope Doyle is certain of now. This is the hope we are certain of. This is the hope we proclaim today and for all our tomorrows. This is the Good News.

If you have been a part of FBC JC over the years with Doyle, you are familiar with one of his favorite blessings to read at the conclusion of our services. Doyle prayed these words for us and over us, and today I want to conclude by reminding us of this prayer from Numbers 6:24-26 ... Doyle's prayer for his beloved congregation as we grieve, as we give thanks, and as we live as Good News people.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.  
Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Letters and Papers from Prison (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), letter no. 89, page 238.