

“ Okay, but Not Okay, and That’s Okay ”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

*For a Memorial Service on All Saints’ Sunday,
to which bereaved families served by Elora-Bethany during the past year were invited.*

John 11.31-36

October 26 (Bethany) and November 2 (Elora), 2014

This reading is part of a larger story. If you want to read the whole thing, click [here](#).

Many people had come to comfort Mary, and when they saw her quickly leave the house, they thought she was going out to the tomb to cry. So they followed her.

Mary went to where Jesus was. Then as soon as she saw him, she knelt at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw that Mary and the people with her were crying, he was terribly upset and asked, “Where have you put his body?”

They replied, “Lord, come and you will see.”

Jesus started crying, and the people said, “See how much he loved Lazarus.”

John 11.31-36
(Contemporary English Version)

Grief is like a beach ball.¹

Of course, in many important ways it is not. Beach balls are for fun, for carefree summer days and frolicking in the waves. Grief is nothing like that.

In one small way, however, grief is like a beach ball.

Have you tried holding an inflated beach ball under water? Pushing down, you can overcome the buoyancy of the air inside. You can hold it down, keep it under, hidden beneath the surface, out of sight. Out of the sight of others, that is. You know it’s there, because you can feel it.

Grief is like that. You can hold it down, hidden from others. You can even try to convince

¹ I had recently heard this beach ball analogy, but can’t remember where. If you do an internet search for “grief beach ball,” you’ll find all sorts of references.

yourself it is not there, you have overcome it, you've gotten over it.

You can hold it down. The moment you release it, though, or when your grasp slips . . . it bursts up. The harder you've had to push it down to keep it under, the more forceful its rise. It explodes out of the water. When it's a beach ball, that's fun. But when it's your grief. . . .

II: What Can I Say?

We've all been in the line at a funeral home. Or, with someone who has had grief barge into their life. What can we say? We want to say something. What?

Starting today, and then in a couple of weeks, and a couple weeks after that, I want to talk about this. What can we say, that will be helpful? Also, what can we avoid saying, because we don't want to be hurtful?

We've all done it, I imagine. We've said something, and it hasn't helped. We've had something said to us, and it hurt.

Before I continue, let's thank God for the people who've wanted to help with their words, whether their words helped or not. We all stumble and trip with our words. But we mean well. They meant well, and they meant it with love.

III: Holding It Under

Today I want to focus on unhelpful things we say that try to hold grief under the water, like the beach ball.

Why do we do it? Grief hurts. We see someone grieving, and we don't want them to hurt. Of course. (Let's be honest, though. Someone's grief can make us really uncomfortable, and we don't like that. So there can be a selfish part of this too. We don't want to see their beach ball. Let's be honest about that.)

So we say things like, "Be strong." Or, we wonder why someone is still upset, when the death was a while ago. Or, we say that someone is "doing well." We mean they are not showing pain, or crying (that we see), so they are "doing fine." All these send the message that they should hold the beach ball under.

If we are grieving, we say it to ourselves. *"Part way through this morning, I just lost it. What's wrong with me?" "I can't seem to get anything done. I'm getting lazy." "Pull yourself together, man!"*

How much energy do we spend, holding the ball under?

IV: The Strength of Tears

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a Christian, a world-class philosopher, and a grieving dad. Nick wrote a book called *Lament for a Son*, about his experiences of grief.

He asks this:

And why is it so important to act strong? I have been graced with the strength to endure. But I have been assaulted [by Eric's death] and in the assault wounded, grievously wounded. Am I to pretend otherwise? Wounds are ugly, I know. They repel. But must they always be swathed?

He continues:

I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not.²

What happens if you don't try to hold the beach ball under?

It floats. You don't know where it is going to go. An unseen current might bring it one way. A breeze might whip it around another. A floating beach ball is chaotic.

That's how I experience grief. Maybe you do too. It's chaos. You can't manage it into tidy steps. You can't put it on a timetable. You don't know what to expect today, never mind tomorrow.

Maybe tears aren't your thing. Maybe you grieve by, for example, keeping busy. Some of us need to be with people. For others, being alone helps more. There is no right way to grieve. There is your way. As long as you are not trying to hold the ball under.

V: God Weeps

We heard the Bible reading. It's part of an episode, when Jesus' friend Lazarus has died, and Jesus is with the man's sisters, Mary and Martha.

Later in this story, we see Jesus' power. He raises Lazarus back to life.

But first in this story, we see Jesus' power. He weeps, he cries.

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 26.

In Jesus, we behold the fullness of God. God, who has tears. The Creator, All-Powerful and All-Knowing, who is healing all things, weeps.

Caleb Wilde is a young funeral director. He says that as Christians, we can talk about “orthodoxy,” believing the right things. Also, “orthopraxis,” which is acting like Jesus. He suggests we also need to have “orthopathos,” feeling like Jesus.³

What does God feel? Look at Jesus. He weeps.

When we grieve, we are following Jesus. When we grieve, our sorrow is joined with God’s sorrow.

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes this:

*“It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is his splendor.”*⁴

VI: Okay, but Not Okay, and That’s Okay.

I’m going to finish with this. It is written by Christopher, Mitchell’s Dad. Mitchell died at age 11.⁵

Months later, my oldest son, Ethan, came into my office. [. . .] I was unprepared for the interruption and my eyes were red and filled with tears. Ethan asked, “Dad, are you okay?” I immediately tried to be superman and put on a brave face, wiping my eyes and said, “Yeah, I’m okay.” [. . .] But Ethan was discerning and knew better [. . .]

I paused a moment then looked Ethan in the eye and said, “Actually, I’m not okay. But I’m okay. Do you know what I mean?” Relief washed over his face and I could tell he not only understood but that he was glad I was being real . . . as if it gave him permission to be real, too. I wanted my son to know that it is okay to hurt . . . that you can be “okay” but “not okay” and that’s okay.

Ethan and I talked about Mitch for a while and he shared some of his sorrows about

³ www.calebwilde.com/2011/09/worshiping-god-through-our-sorrow/

⁴ Wolterstorff, 81.

⁵ “Mitchell’s Journey” is a blog on Facebook by Christopher and Natalie Jones, Mitchell’s parents. I read this particular post on Caleb Wilde’s blog, www.calebwilde.com/2014/07/okay-but-not-okay-and-thats-okay

losing his younger brother. We both cried together. I hugged Ethan and let him know how much I loved him – every bit as much. We crossed a threshold with grief that day. My son knew it was okay to hurt and that pretending otherwise serves nobody, not even ourselves. To the contrary, we do a great disservice when we pretend. [. . .]

I cannot run from sorrow any more than I can run from my shadow on a sunny day. I must learn to live with love and sorrow – there seems no other way.

I'm okay ... but I'm not okay ... and that's okay.

VII: What Can I Say?

We'll return to this in a couple weeks.

For now, what can I say?

I suggest things that don't push the ball under, that say it's okay to be not okay.

How about . . .

- I am so sorry for your loss.
- I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in anyway I can.
- You will be in my thoughts and prayers.

Or, say nothing. Just be with the person.

Anything that lets them be okay, and not okay, and says that okay.