

Practical Christianity: How to comfort someone who has lost a loved one

Message for Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Romans 12:15;
Galatians 6:2

Children's Message: from Romans 12:15 "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."

"Hi, Mommy, what are you doing?" asked Susie.

"I'm making a casserole for Mrs. Smith next door," said her mother.

"Why?" asked Susie, who was only six years old.

"Because Mrs. Smith is very sad; she lost her daughter and she has a broken heart. We need to take care of her for a little while."

"Why, Mommy?"

"You see, Susie, when someone is very, very sad, they have trouble doing the little things like making dinner or other chores. Because we're part of a community and Mrs. Smith is our neighbour, we need to do some things to help her. Mrs. Smith won't ever be able to talk with her daughter or hug her or do all those wonderful things that mommies and daughters do together. You are a very smart girl, Susie; maybe you'll think of some way to help take care of Mrs. Smith."

Susie thought seriously about this challenge and how she could do her part in caring for Mrs. Smith. A few minutes later, Susie knocked on her door. After a few moments Mrs. Smith answered the knock with a "Hi, Susie."

Susie noticed that Mrs. Smith didn't have that familiar musical quality about her voice when she greeted someone.

Mrs. Smith also looked as though she might have been crying because her eyes were watery and swollen.

"What can I do for you, Susie?" asked Mrs. Smith.

"My mommy says that you lost your daughter and you're very, very sad with a broken heart." Susie held her hand out shyly. In it was a Band-Aid. "This is for your broken heart." Mrs. Smith gasped, choking back her tears. She knelt down and hugged Susie. Through her tears she said, "Thank you, darling girl, this will help a lot."

Mrs. Smith accepted Susie's act of kindness and took it one step further. She purchased a small key ring with a plexiglass picture frame - the ones designed to carry keys and proudly display a family portrait at the same time. Mrs. Smith placed Susie's Band-Aid in the frame to remind herself to heal a little every time she sees it. She wisely knows that healing takes time and support. It has become her symbol for healing, while not forgetting the joy and love she experienced with her daughter.

Source: Meladee McCarty (author of *Acts of Kindness: How to Create a Kindness Revolution*) was on a radio talk show in Chicago when someone called in with this story.

Message: "Practical Christianity: How to comfort someone who has lost a loved one"

A friend of yours has died. Not a really close friend, but someone you genuinely cared about. You're at the funeral home for the visitation. The line inches forward. Up ahead, you catch snippets of conversation people are having with the bereaved family. Suddenly, one of them bursts out laughing. Must have been a good joke. You wonder, "Is it OK to tell jokes at a funeral?" But then you notice others in the line have tears in their eyes. "What should I say?" you ask yourself.

- "Be happy; she's gone to be with Jesus." Maybe that will cheer them up.
- "Be strong; show everyone how big your faith is." Yeah, that will encourage them.
- "They did a wonderful job on him; he doesn't look dead at all." Yes, I want to give them comfort.
- Please, God, help me to NOT say something stupid.

Just about all of us have been in this position. Many of you have been on the receiving end of these comments. I'd like to give you some ideas for how to connect our faith with what we do and say at the time of death.

1) Jesus defeated death; he will do the same for us

Today, Easter Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He triumphed over death, and he prepares the way for us, for the time when we die.

Many times Jesus predicted his death. **BUT** he always added on the prediction that he would also be raised to life again. **Not once** did he ever talk about his own death, without also talking about the resurrection. He had that hope.

We all know we are going to die. Jesus knew he was going to die. He was absolutely certain about that. With the same certainty, he knew that he would rise again to life. Not just hopeful, not just wishing it might be true, but he knew it. Period.

He knew the power of God. He promised his followers – that means us – that God will be with us in our journey through death.

John 14:1-3, Today's English Version:

“Do not be worried and upset,” Jesus told them.

“Believe in God and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am.”

That's the theology of death. But it sure helps to have someone with skin on be close to you when you're in the valley of death.

2) Ideas for talking with someone who is dying

Jef Kohlsmith had three friends die last November-December. While talking with them, they told him about the things people said to them: both the helpful things, and the, well, less than helpful.

- “I don't want to talk about cancer all the time. Let's talk about the everyday stuff of life, the same as we always did.”
- Pray for them, and let them know you're praying for them.

3) Ideas for comforting someone who has lost a loved one

In preparation for this message, I went back to visit people with whom I had a funeral service this past year. I asked them what it was that people did or said that was helpful.

But first: there are plenty of Bible passages which talk about comforting people who are going through hard times. Here are a couple.

Romans 12:15, New International Version:

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Galatians 6:2, New Revised Standard Version:

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

If you have lost a loved one yourself, or gone through any kind of trouble, you may be the very person to help someone else going through that:

2 Corinthians 1:4, New Living Translation:

[God] comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

The Bible says “mourn with others,” “bear others' burdens,” and “comfort others.” But it doesn't say *how* to do this. In talking with people about this, I have discovered something else: there is no magic formula for what words to use, or what to do.

I have heard, over and over, what *not* to say; and the top of that list is “I know just how you feel.” One woman, when someone said that to her, replied, “Oh, really. Tell me, then, how am I feeling right now?” The truth is, even if you've gone through this yourself, everyone's experience is different. There is no “one size fits all.”

What *can* you do or say? Love. The answer is all wrapped up in that one little word. How do you love? A million different ways. Here are some things people mentioned to me:

- “A friend brought over a pan of muffins, which was nice. But the most important thing is that he just sat there and held my hand. That meant so much to me.”
- A husband or a wife has died. If you did things together with them as couples, then keep on doing that. Learn how to play three-handed euchre.
- Include the person in things. One woman had someone say this to her: “C'mon, we're going to supper at the Anglican Church, and you're coming with us.” Another woman had a friend phone her: “I'm going to Myrtle Beach for two weeks vacation. I just bought your ticket; you're coming with me.”
- You were friends before; still be friends after. Do the common, everyday things that friends do.
- Deliver soup to someone. Make a headscarf for a woman who is losing her hair to cancer.
- Listen. Just let the person talk, if that's what they need to do.

There are a million ways to show our love. The main thing is: *do it!*