

At the 10:30 am service on February 7, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 25:1-7 and 1 Corinthians 13.1-13.

“Coping with Crises and Grief”

When I was five years old, living in a busy suburb in South Africa’s biggest city, Johannesburg, we had a lovely baby black Labrador retriever. Late one afternoon I took her for a walk. I came upon a busy highway and I decided to carry the dog across the road. Once over the road a loud bang from the street frightened the dog and she jump out of my grasp and ran up the sidewalk and darted across the road.

It happened so fast: I heard the screech of tires from a big Dodge fastback and then the squealing of the dog. I ran to the spot of the accident, my dog lay in the road with the distraught driver and a gathering crowd looking on. I picked up the limp body and carried her the quarter mile home. The dog was dead.

I arrived home and thankfully was received by sensitive and understanding parents. We went to the back yard, dug a hole, and buried the pet with a prayer. The ritual of the burial was very meaningful. As you can imagine, this was quite traumatic.

Crises and traumas unfortunately are part of life. Suellen and I ministered to a lovely friend this week whose car accidentally hit an elderly woman crossing the street. The women died within a half hour. Daily we witness deaths and injuries from conflicts and disasters in our own and foreign countries. The Haiti earthquake is the last of a string of crises.

In his book, *Anchoring Your Well Being: Christian Wholeness in a Fractured World*, Howard Clinebell notes four types of crises: *accidental* that happen “out of the blue,” a car crash and the like; *developmental* that occur at every significant life-stage transition, from pre-teen to teen to adult, etc.; *chronic trauma and grief* which occur when the cause is on-going, such as someone with Alzheimer’s disease or families living with a severely disabled child; and *collective crises* which are those caused by social factors such wars, political violence, genocidal pogroms, and ethnic “cleansing”; or natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, fires, and hurricanes that traumatize whole regions in many parts of the world.

Given this list it’s no wonder that every one of us has experienced some form of crisis or loss. Coping with crises and grief can be complicated and long-term and in most cases it is. This sermon is not therapy and it’s not complicated. It’s basically a simple, spiritual way of coping with crises and grief. It basically highlights love in different manifestations and in doing so is accompanied by two other important biblical qualities: faith and hope. It will be seen also that love is the ground of faith and hope.

Suellen mentioned to a work colleague this week that we were visiting our friend who was involved in the accident. Suellen’s colleague said: “All you can say is: ‘I love you.’” In other words, share love and love will find a way, as our bulletin cover quote states. All this is corroborated by Clinebell.

He writes: "Love from some person or persons and a measure of hope and faith are essential if healing and growth eventually are to follow severe losses. Again we discover the wisdom of 1 Corinthians 13.13, in which the Apostle Paul tells us, 'faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.'"

Holocaust survivor, psychologist and author, Viktor Frankl, says the same in a fascinating realization during a forced labor march in a Nazi concentration camp. He writes: "We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road running through the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his hand behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered: '*If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us.*'"

"That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind," writes Frankl. "Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me; saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look then was more luminous than the sun, which was beginning to rise.

"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth: That love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.* I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

"In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way - an honorable way - in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment."

According to Clinebell, "Studies of death camp survivors revealed that those who managed to survive the extreme deprivation, humiliation, violence and massive losses were in most cases, those that had three things. They had found ways to see at least a little meaning in the experience (faith); they held a belief that they would somehow survive to fulfill some intense dream, such as being reunited with someone they loved deeply or writing about their ghastly experiences so the world would know the truth (hope); and they received at least occasional caring from another human being (love).

Those who suffered from vacuums in faith, hope, and love tended to drown in despair and die sooner because their will to live had been stolen.

It's tough to have faith and hope in the immediate experience of a crisis or trauma. But we get Clinebell's point. When we appropriate genuine care from family and friends in crisis and trauma we find faith, hope and love to carry us through. As difficult as it is, when we meditate on the words "faith," "hope" and "love" in our times of need we survive and heal. When we know that God loves us and others love us we pull through. We never sink with these qualities in our consciousness.

Frankl's story of love and relationship reminds me of another similar story but it comes before the crisis and shows that we can be proactive in our care. While crises and grief follow an event there are times when we can anticipate a crisis or a situation of grief and seek love in practical ways which then bolsters faith and keeps hope alive when the crisis occurs. We cope by preparing for a crisis.

The story is told in the song "Travelin' Soldier" by the Dixie Chicks. It may be made up but it makes an excellent point. I shall now tell the story as it is told in the song without the chorus:

Two days past eighteen
 He was waiting for the bus in his army green
 Sat down in a booth at a cafe there
 Gave his order to a girl with a bow in her hair
 He's a little shy so she gives him a smile
 And he said would you mind sittin' down for a while
 And talking to me,
 I'm feeling a little low
 She said I'm off in an hour and I know where we can go

So they went down and they sat on the pier
 He said I bet you got a boyfriend but I don't care
 I got no one to send a letter to
 Would you mind if I sent one back here to you...

So the letters came from an army camp

In California then Vietnam
 And he told her of his heart
 It might be love and all of the things he was so scared of
 He said when it's getting kinda rough over here
 I think of that day sittin' down at the pier
 And I close my eyes and see your pretty smile
 Don't worry but I won't be able to write for awhile.

One Friday night at a football game
 The Lord's Prayer said and the anthem sang
 A man said folks would you bow your heads
 For a list of local Vietnam dead.

Crying all alone under the stands
was a piccolo player in the marching band
and one name read and nobody really cared
but a pretty little girl with a bow in her hair.

It's a sad story but the Dixie Chicks make the point that love ministers to us. We feel God's presence because God is love. It's simple but it works.

Faith, hope and love came to me in the sensitivity of parents and a simple ritual. For Frankl it was a picture of his wife and a consciousness of love. For our friend involved in the car accident it was the support of family and friends and a prayer. For the "travelin' soldier" it was the girl with a pretty smile and a bow in her hair.

We experience crises and grief differently and we handle them differently. Irrespective of how we experience them or how we cope with them we know that we cope a whole lot better with healthy doses of faith, hope and love – with the greatest of these which is love. Amen.