

The winding road of grief

A funeral sermon

Norm Dyck

For several weeks now, those of you who knew Henry best saw his decline into despair. Those of you closest to Henry knew of his struggle with depression and mental illness—the years of highs and lows, of medication, of days shadowed by hopelessness. A few years ago in Henry’s openness to discuss his illness we thought we saw a candle of hope being lit. He seemed to be putting to rest a difficult chapter of his life. But recently church members and friends noticed Henry’s distance. Depression had gripped his life in such utter despair that in his final decision to end his life the world seems dark as night. We are left with so many questions. Especially we wonder why.

Henry’s death leaves a void in our lives. Here at Graysville Mennonite we feel it keenly. I will miss his handshakes, his words of encouragement, his passion for God’s word. His seat is empty; his voice in the choir will be missed. As Frank told me, “We’ve lost our encourager, and we’re not sure how we can replace him.” We will miss his involvement in Sunday worship. The children will feel the absence of the friend who always noticed them.

We were all stunned by Henry’s death. It has left many of us, family and friends, frozen and numb. Some of you may be feeling guilty. Henry helped so many people. You may wonder, “How could I have helped him?” “What could I have done?”

Some of you may be feeling anger. Your anger may be directed at the doctors who years ago were not able to do as much for Henry as you had hoped they would. Some of you may be angry at Henry for leaving you behind. And your anger may be directed at God. “Why would God allow this to happen to a faithful Christian brother, a wonderful father and husband?” Some of you may be asking, “Why did God abandon Henry?”

Those of you who are Henry’s family have watched your husband and your dad go through the agony of his struggle. Your

family circle has been broken, and you may be feeling abandoned too. Feeling alone is frightening. Someone has said that losing a loved one is like waking up in a strange country beside a deserted road. You stumble to your feet, uncertain about how you got there, not sure which way to go. The world is empty and silent.

I'm sure the disciples felt that way after Good Friday. They accompanied their master into Jerusalem with palm branches waving, but within a few days he was arrested. They risked everything on this promising leader, and he was executed as a criminal. They had left their families and occupations to follow Jesus, and now all their hopes were dashed. After the crucifixion, some of the disciples went into hiding, while others left Jerusalem and headed for home. All must have felt abandoned.

In Luke 24 we read about two disciples on the road to Emmaus, leaving Jerusalem. We can hear their despair, as they tell the stranger walking with them, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (v. 21). Their grief kept them from recognising that their companion was Jesus. These mourners felt forsaken by God, but all the while their risen Lord was at their side.

There is a clue here for us. Two mourners long ago expected their Lord to be available in hard times. They had been led to

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believe that he would stand by them. Now they felt completely alone. The tears in their eyes prevented them from recognising that it was Jesus who came to walk that lonely road with them.

That same Jesus, risen from the dead, conquering death, conquering the grave, is here to walk that lonesome road with you and me. Keep the cross of Christ before you. The road ahead is not an easy one. It may be full of bumps and unexpected turns. Occasionally

you'll feel lost, unable to back up, afraid to take a step forward. You'll be angry. Sometimes you will be convinced that everyone has abandoned you, even God.

But God will be there. He may be barely visible to you right now, but sometime in the encouraging words of a friend, God will speak. In the passing remark of a stranger, God will be present. And when you worship him, at home, at church, at work, Jesus

Christ who died and rose again for all of us will make himself known to you. Your family circle will never be the same, but with the help of Christ it will be mended again.

When we think of Henry's death we will continue to have questions. We don't have answers for the decision he made. But we do know that nothing is beyond the scope of our Saviour's love. Henry was a believer in Jesus Christ. He knew that his Saviour had died on the cross and had risen again to save him from his sins. Henry had faith in Jesus, and because of that faith we claim the tremendous promise in Paul's letter to the Romans: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Because we do not have answers we cannot judge. We have a risen Saviour and God who judges for us. The final decision that Henry made throws us onto the tender mercy of our God. We don't know how God judges suicide, but we do know that our God is a God of love and grace. We know that your family is in the tender care of God right now.

Your grief is something each of you will have to work through individually. No one can walk this path for you. But this path does not have to be walked alone. The members of our church family are ready to listen and care for you. The church doors are open for all of you; my office will always be open to you. The homes and the lives of the members of Graysville Mennonite will be open to you as well, as together we sort out our feelings of loss, of pain and grief, and as together we look to the cross of Christ for strength.

Grief can be like a winding road in a dense dark forest. From a distance the road seems to disappear. The way looks impassable. Yet with God's help, when obstacles suddenly appear in front of us, paths do become visible. As you come closer, you see the road winding beneath the trees. It's safe. God is there. Trust in God. Follow his path. God will lead you on to life, life in this world and in the world to come.

About the author

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