

Good Grief!

BY MARK MCCLINTOCK

A puppet can be an effective counseling tool with children, for an imaginary character diminishes the communication barrier between adults and children. In this sermon, Sidney guides children in developing healthy patterns of grieving, behaviors that will facilitate their encounters with loss throughout their lives.

As a parent and a minister called to work with children, I want all that is best for the little ones in my care. In the church, however, we often confuse what is best with what elicits happiness. Children naturally experience the sorrow and pain of loss, whether it is a misplaced toy, a move to a new school, or the death of a loved one. Citing a child's natural resilience as a rationale, adults may assume that the young person's grief experience will be brief and have no long-term consequences. A well-meaning grown-up may even attempt to expedite the "rebound" by engaging the child in cheerful activities. A far more helpful response would be to guide children in developing healthy patterns of grieving—behaviors that will facilitate their encounters with loss throughout their lives.

A puppet can be an effective counseling tool with children; research shows the imaginary character can diminish the communication barrier that naturally exists between an adult and a child. A puppet on the adult's hand functions as a peer and advocate for the child; a puppet on the child's hand allows the child to express troubling thoughts and emotions, projecting the responsibility for these ideas onto the puppet. In my years of church ministry, the art of ventriloquism served me well in communicating with children, both in counseling and teaching. When a puppet as advocate seemed the best way to help listeners understand and learn a theological point, I would even incorporate it into a children's sermon.

I wrote "Good Grief" soon after a beloved First Grade Sunday School teacher had died. The preschool and early elementary school-age children, as well as the numerous adults in attendance, responded with great compassion and sensitivity. Although Sidney is a puppet—and I am very careful to remind people that he is a puppet whose voice comes from inside me—my listeners of all ages comprehended the truth of the human experience Sidney helped me to speak. The gospel reading for the day was John 11:1-44, the death and raising of Lazarus. Though the restoration of Lazarus' life is important as a prefigurement of Jesus' resurrection, that part of the story interferes with the child's ability to let go of the individual who has died. I chose to emphasize Jesus' empathic and healthy human response to the death of his friend and the grief of Mary and Martha.



MARK: Hello, Sidney, how are you today?

SIDNEY: Terrible.

I beg your pardon?

I said I'm terrible.

But I said, how are you today?

I heard you the first time! I'm still terrible!

(Taking script from pocket and reading over it) **Wait a minute, Sid, that's not in the script. When I say, "How are you today?" you're supposed to say, "Just fine, how are you?" Let's try it again. Hello, Sidney, how are you today?**

(Angrily) **JUST FINE, HOW ARE YOU!!!**

Oh, that was so much better. Sidney, you're my puppet, right?

Right.

And I make you speak, right?

Let me see. *(Pantomimes trying to speak by himself)* Looks like I can't do it by myself.

Then when I say, "How are you?" why do you keep saying "Terrible"?

Well...I guess maybe that's how you really feel, too.

Now that I think about it, I am feeling rather sad. So you're feeling terrible, huh?

(To children) Excuse him. Sometimes it takes him a little while to catch on.

But I had no idea you could be sad. You're always smiling, you know.

That's the way I'm made. Besides, I see a lot of grown-ups who always smile even though they feel rotten inside, don't you?

I suppose most of us hide our feelings sometimes. That's not always healthy.

Healthy?

Right. It's not healthy to bottle up our feelings. There are healthy ways we can show our feelings.

You mean I gotta do exercises while I cry? (*Sobs while bending down and up*) One-boo-hoo! Two-boo-hoo! Three-boo-hoo!

No, Sidney. What I mean is that crying can be a healthy way to show sadness.

Sometimes I feel like crying. And sometimes I don't.

That's normal. It is also healthy to talk about why you are sad. Would you like to tell me about it?

You know my best friend, Jake? His grandma died last week. She took care of him every day when he came home from school. He loved her a lot.

I can see why you feel sad for Jake.

I also feel confused. I don't know what to say to Jake. I called him on the phone, and he wouldn't talk. So I went to his house, and he just cried and cried. What should I do? Tell him he's getting healthier?

That's a good question, Sidney. We just heard a Bible story about Jesus going to see some friends who were sad.

I heard that! Lazarus died, and his sisters were upset with Jesus.

They knew Jesus had healed people who were sick. They believed Jesus could help Lazarus get well. But Jesus didn't come until it was too late—Lazarus had already died.

When Jesus came to them, Mary and Martha were filled with grief.

Grief?

Yes, do you know what grief is?

It's what my mom gives me when I show her my report card.

Actually, grief is what you go through when you lose something or someone. It might be one of your favorite toys, or it might be the loss of your friends if your family moves to a new home. It might even be the loss of a person you love, when they died.

Like Jake lost his grandma.

Right. If you keep grief inside, it can become poisonous. You need to let it out. That's called mourning.

What is it called after supper? Evening? (*He laughs*) Oops, sorry. I guess I shouldn't laugh.

No, laughter can help, too, as long as it doesn't hurt someone else.

I'm good at making people laugh! Did Jesus make Mary and Martha laugh?



No.

Did he tell them everything would be okay?

No.

Then what did he do?

He cried with them.

Oh, he cried with them—He cried with them?? Jesus, the Son of God, cried??

Jesus, the Son of God, and the human being, felt their sadness. He shared their grief. Sometimes the best thing you can do when someone is grieving is just to be with them. You don't have to say anything. And, if you feel like crying, too, that's okay.

I guess...if I share Jake's grief, it might make it a little easier on him.

It might. It can help just to know someone else cares.

Hey, didn't Jesus bring Lazarus back to life in that story? Maybe he can bring Jake's grandma back to life!

The Bible does teach that Jesus will bring us back to life some day, but we don't know when that will be. Until then, we will still lose people and things, and we will still grieve. And Jesus has shown us that when we do grieve, he is grieving with us. Jesus cares.

Jesus cares. Well, I still feel sad, but it's a lot easier to be sad when I know that Jesus is sad with me.

I am sorry, Sidney, that I didn't take your grief seriously at first. I will try to be there with you while you are sad.

Mark, I'm a puppet, you're stuck with me whether you like it or not!

I do like it. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank you for choosing to be with us when we are sad, grieve with us, and cry with us. Fill us with your kind of love so that we will stick with each other in our happy and sad times, too. Amen.



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