




Foundational Essay

COMFORT THOSE WHO MOURN


CYNTHIA M. CAMPBELL

INTRODUCTION



All religions—Christian and non-Christian alike—are linked to events that happen in people’s lives. Various rituals accompany birth, coming of age, marriage, and, of course, death. The religious practices that we engage in at the time of death have two functions: they honor the one who has died, and they surround those who grieve with needed care and support. We *Comfort Those Who Mourn*. Customs vary, not only among religious traditions, but also from one community to another within religious groups. Some practices, however, are common to almost all. When there is a death, family, friends, and neighbors reach out: calls are made, cards are sent, social media messages are posted. Stories are told and retold. And there is almost always food, usually of the type people recognize as *comfort food*.

Our ability to comfort one another is a response to the comfort we have received from God.



Over the course of this essay, we hope to open up the practice of comforting one another in two directions. First, we will consider the roots of the practice itself; second, we will expand the practice beyond the rituals that accompany death. Some social scientists have suggested that *empathy*, the capacity for feeling another’s suffering, is hard-wired into human beings. The instinct to reach out to others proved an evolutionary benefit, they argue. Providing care and support to one another enabled communities or extended family groups to survive and thrive, thus passing on that trait to succeeding generations. Those who follow the Jewish and Christian traditions might say much the same thing in another way. We are created in the image of God, and thus the compassion we extend to those who suffer or grieve is a reflection of God’s own character. Our ability to comfort one another is a response to the comfort we have received from God. In whatever ways we think of its origin, comforting one another appears to be deeply embedded in the human experience.

Comforting those who mourn is most closely associated with death. We gather round grieving friends and family; we accompany them to the grave and back. But there are many other things that we grieve and many other occasions for mourning. The loss of a job or marriage or physical health or the future we imagined for ourselves or someone else. A dear friend moves away. A beloved pet dies or gets lost. A family member becomes estranged.

Someone we love is living but is no longer the person they once were. All of these are occasions when we feel deep and profound grief, and we need real comfort from those around us. We also mourn the despoiling of the natural world around us, injustice and inequality in our society, the lack of civility in civic discourse and everyday life, the breakdown of community and commitment to the common good. Loss takes many forms, and so does grief. As those who seek to *Comfort Those Who Mourn*, it is vital that we recognize the wide range of both grief and loss.

The practice of comforting one another is not only about giving; it is also about receiving. Henri Nouwen wrote about the “wounded healer,” suggesting that we care best when we recognize our own broken places and know what it means to receive healing.¹ When we acknowledge our own losses and are grateful for the comfort we have received, we are most able to come alongside those who mourn. Comforting others involves knowing and naming loss, being present to one another as we grieve, and hearing God’s promises that speak words of abiding hope into our experiences of loss. Comforting one another is not a destination but a journey; making peace with loss and gaining the strength to live through to the other side doesn’t happen in a moment. It does not proceed in a straight line or on a fixed timetable. It is a journey that requires patience for both the one who comforts and the one who mourns. Fortunately, we are not without resources. The Bible is our most reliable source of strength. Most of the passages used in this essay come from those suggested by the *Book of Common Worship* at the time of death. These ancient, and hopefully familiar, texts will guide our reflection on the practice of receiving and giving comfort.

For the purposes of this unit, we will explore comforting those who mourn in four aspects of the overall practice:

- Show Up
- Name Loss and Receive God’s Comfort
- Comfort Others
- Share God’s Promises

SHOW UP

Often, the first and important step is just showing up. When someone has experienced loss, what they need is for others to remind them that they are not alone in their loss. As one wise and experienced pastor used to say, “When there is loss, this is when the church gathers round.” But how we do this matters. Since, as the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum, our tendency is to fill it with words. We think there are words we are supposed to say that will somehow make an awful situation better. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of well-intentioned but deeply disturbing words, such as: “God needed another angel.” Perhaps someone has tried to comfort you by saying, “After so much suffering, surely she is better off now.” This may well be true, but especially in the first moments of loss, it may not speak to the pain that is felt by those left behind. Perhaps you have avoided going to see a grieving friend for fear of saying the wrong thing.

All of us, pastors and laypeople alike, want to find the right words to share to bring comfort and express our care. But sometimes what we need to do is simply show up and shut up. The ministry of presence, of being there for and with one another in times of deep loss, is what is usually needed



The ministry of presence, of being there for and with one another in times of deep loss, is what is usually needed most, especially at first.



1. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).



These friends see Job's suffering; they are willing to look it square in the face. The depth of their empathy is obvious as they sit with Job on the ground. The power of their presence is in the silence they keep.



most, especially at first. A striking example of this is found in the story of Job. In the opening chapter, Job is described as “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). He was also blessed with a large family and considerable wealth. All of this is taken away: some of his animals are stolen, and others are consumed by fire; a windstorm destroys the house where all his sons and daughters were feasting, and all are killed; finally, Job himself is struck with disease. Three friends heard about Job's devastating losses, and they gathered “to console and comfort him” (2:11). But when they arrived, Job was so disfigured by his disease that they scarcely recognized him. The friends wept, and then “they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (2:13).

The rest of the book of Job is, in fact, a dialogue between Job and his three friends. They spend hours and days trying to fit Job's suffering into their theological constructs, and Job is neither convinced nor consoled. But at first, these friends do the right thing; they show up. They sit down next to Job on the ground. And they don't say a word, because they can see and feel the great depth of his suffering. The poignancy of this scene is profound. These friends *see* Job's suffering; they are willing to look it square in the face. The depth of their empathy is obvious as they sit with Job on the ground. The power of their presence is in the silence they keep.

Another powerful example of showing up with and for someone who is suffering is found in the stories of the death of Jesus. All of the Gospels record that some of Jesus' closest family and friends kept vigil with him as he died. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name Mary Magdalene as well as other women (see Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 24); John adds Jesus' mother, her sister, and the beloved disciple (see John 19:25–27). By their silent presence, they showed their solidarity with the one they loved in his suffering. Their love was a witness to his death.

These examples suggest that, in the face of suffering and loss, the first step for those who would seek to comfort is to simply be present, to show up. This is more difficult than it sounds. When we show up when another is in pain or in mourning, we enter a liminal space. We are reminded of our own frailty and mortality. But when we come alongside another in their loss, both parties come away sustained by the experience of solidarity. This presence is often experienced through touch; hands are held and hugs are exchanged as the comfort we give one another is physical as well as spiritual.

We might think about the times and places we have shown up for one another: in a hospital waiting room while someone waits on the outcome of a surgery, at the bedside of one recovering or facing death, at a visitation or reception following a funeral. The Jewish tradition ritualizes this at the time of death with the practice known as *sitting shiva*. Especially in observant families, a funeral is held within three days of death. Following the burial, the family goes home (or to the home of the deceased) to begin a seven-day period of mourning. Sometimes mourners will sit on low stools to express their grief. During this time, friends and family come, usually bringing food, and join those who mourn. They sit with them to share their loss and honor the memory of the one who died. Sometimes, perhaps in the morning or afternoon or evening, a prayer is offered (usually the mourners' *Kaddish*) in honor of the dead. It is a powerful practice of setting aside time to mark death and share the burden of grief.

NAME LOSS AND RECEIVE GOD'S COMFORT


Loss comes in all sizes and shapes. Perhaps your family moves away from a beloved home to a new place, leaving behind long-time friends and familiar settings. You graduate from school and drift apart from people you thought you would know forever. You change jobs, and even if it comes with new challenges and better benefits, you have lost colleagues and an old routine. Some losses come with the territory of life; others are unexpected and devastating. A marriage you intended to last until death comes apart, and the pain seems to never end. A health crisis for you or a beloved changes all the plans you had for the future. A financial upheaval brings crippling debt and uncertainty about how to survive. Violence or disaster takes away your security or livelihood or home. Death brings an end to life and relationships, but loss and grief take many forms.

Before we can engage in the practice of comforting those who mourn, we must recognize our own loss and experience our own grief. We grow in our ability to comfort others as we receive comfort from family and friends and from God. The psalms are full of references to God as One who comforts or consoles. Martin Luther used Psalm 46 as the basis for his hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalms 46:1). God is often called a *rock* or *fortress* or *shelter* in the face of danger.


One of the most powerful examples of divine comfort is found in Isaiah 43:1b–2: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; / I have called you by name, you are mine. / When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; / and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; / when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, / and the flame shall not consume you.” Unlike the first (or historic) Isaiah, whose ministry took place before the conquest of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians, this prophet writes decades later, likely near the end of the exile and in the earliest years of the return to the ruins of Jerusalem. The prophet’s audience are the survivors of generational trauma. They are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of people who saw their homes destroyed and their beloved city Jerusalem laid to waste. Into this devastating loss, God speaks directly to God’s beloved, to the people God calls “my own.”

Notice that God’s words are not conditional. It’s not *if* you pass through the waters or walk through fire. It’s *when*. God’s comfort is not like an insurance policy that provides a benefit *if* there should be a problem. This is a promise that *when* disaster strikes—and it will, if it hasn’t already—God will be right there in the midst of the flood and fire. Through the voice of the prophet, God calls the people to recognize where they are at the moment and to find God there with them. This is not “pie in the sky by and by”; it is believing that God walks with us in our devastation, loss, and grief.

Jesus provides another powerful example of naming loss and finding comfort in the midst of it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks for an extended time with his disciples on his last night with them in the upper room. Scholars sometimes call this the “Farewell Discourse,” in which Jesus is trying to prepare his friends for his impending death. Chapter 14 opens with these words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” (John 14:1). Of course, Jesus knows that their hearts *are* troubled. Conflict between Jesus and religious authorities had been escalating for some time. He had already warned them of his impending death (see John 12–13). What they are probably trying to hide, Jesus names: you *are* anxious and frightened;



Before we can engage in the practice of comforting those who mourn, we must recognize our own loss and experience our own grief.



anticipating danger but not knowing what is on the other side. Into their fear and anticipatory grief, Jesus says, “You trust in God, trust also in me” (a better translation into English than “believe” at this point).

A little later in this chapter, Jesus names their fear even more explicitly: “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18). Most of us fear, at one time or another, that God has abandoned us, that we are ultimately alone. It is precisely into that fear that Jesus speaks: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (14:27). We often use these words when comforting one another at the time of death or in the funeral service itself. They are words we need to embrace as we come face to face with profound loss. This is God’s promise to walk alongside us whatever the danger and no matter how traumatic the loss.

There are times when all of us need to be reminded of God’s presence and care. The *Book of Common Worship*² suggests many Scripture passages that speak to troubled hearts. They are helpful, not only at the time of death, but also in the face of the other losses we experience. Some will speak more powerfully at one time than another, but all are worth memorizing so that they are available when needed. *Glory to God*³ and other hymnals have topic indexes that suggest hymns that give voice to grief and affirm God’s promises.

COMFORT OTHERS

“Comfort, O comfort my people, / says your God. / Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, / and cry to her / that she has served her term, / that her penalty is paid” (Isaiah 40:1–2a). These words begin what scholars call *Deutero* (or Second) Isaiah. The commission of this prophet is to be the voice of God’s comfort and consolation. The prophet’s task is also to exhort these survivors to make the long journey back to Judea and begin the work of rebuilding the city, the temple, and their lives. The chapter as a whole is a majestic tribute to God’s continuing power and concludes with these famous words: “[T]hose who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, / they shall mount up with wings like eagles, / they shall run and not be weary, / they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). Comfort provides strength for the journey ahead.

Just as loss comes in many forms, so does the work of comforting one another. There is no one right way to bring comfort, care, or support to others. But there is a collection of practices that have proven to be most helpful over the years. Some are practical; others are liturgical. Together, these activities support the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those who mourn and of the community that stands in solidarity with them.

Those who have experienced loss are often simply overwhelmed. The ordinary tasks of life that people juggle every day are more than they can handle. Thus, some of the most comforting things others can do is take over some of these basic tasks. Bringing food is one of the most obvious and often most needed of these tasks. Many churches organize *meal trains* for families at the time of death or other crisis. Each delivery provides not only food but also tangible signs of care, comfort, and companionship.

Other tasks may be less obvious but just as needed. We can offer to do grocery shopping or pick up prescriptions, do laundry, or take over car pools if there are young children in a family. Perhaps pets need to be cared



Those who have experienced loss are often simply overwhelmed. The ordinary tasks of life that people juggle every day are more than they can handle. Thus, some of the most comforting things others can do is take over some of these basic tasks.



2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018). In particular, see 756–61, 809–11.
3. *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

for. Or, if a family needs to travel to a funeral, the offer of house-sitting may be welcomed. These are only small examples of the many ways that we can comfort one another by helping those who mourn to keep going when they are overwhelmed by loss.

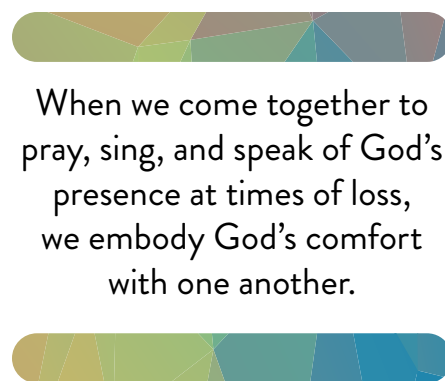
Some of the grief we experience is acute; at the time of death or divorce or loss of a job, the pain is great, and so is the need for presence and support. But grieving lasts beyond the funeral, and so does the need for people to gather round. Some long-term practices include support groups, prayer groups, and the ministry of sending cards with notes of care. Many churches offer services of healing and wholeness that include opportunities to pray with and for those who mourn a variety of losses, providing the solidarity through which we “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2).

Most of the expressions of comfort listed above are things that many of us can do as individuals. Just as significant are the forms of comfort that we offer as a community. Among the most important are services of worship. When we come together to pray, sing, and speak of God’s presence at times of loss, we embody God’s comfort with one another. When a colleague of mine served as an interim pastor, he challenged the congregation to a new ministry. Frequently, when a member died and family gathered from out of town for the service, my friend discovered that few friends were able to come to the service. There was not enough of a congregation to sing the hymns and add their voices to the prayers. Members of the church provided the family a meal or reception after the service, but they rarely attended the service. So my friend reminded church members that a funeral service is a worship service of the congregation and that their presence and their voices were needed to help a grieving family worship God and give thanks for the life of the one they loved. From then on, funerals became occasions for solidarity, support, and joy.

Almost all of the ways of expressing comfort in this section involve very practical actions. Care is expressed through actions or activities that provide some tangible benefit. The psalm we most often associate with funeral services is Psalm 23, probably because of the phrase: “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (v. 4, KJV). But notice the very tangible and practical forms that care takes in the psalm. The shepherd guides the sheep to where there is food (green pastures) and water. The shepherd makes sure the flock is going the right way. The shepherd is there with a staff when danger arises, to protect against predators. When the psalm turns to direct address, God is experienced as the one who provides lavish hospitality, even when times are hard: God prepares a table with food; God anoints the guest with fragrant, refreshing oil; God refills the cup; God makes the psalmist a home.


SHARE GOD’S PROMISES

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4–7). These familiar words are among a handful of biblical texts that often find their way into both wedding and funeral services. The exhortation to rejoice speaks to our times of celebration; the promise of peace is what is needed in times of grief.




When we come together to pray, sing, and speak of God’s presence at times of loss, we embody God’s comfort with one another.

Both joy and grief are at play in Paul's letter to the Philippians. He is writing to a church for whom he has deep affection and admiration. He urges them to stay strong and to live into their identity as those who share the "mind of Christ" who emptied himself out of love for the world (see Philippians 2:1–11). But Paul wrote this exhortation to joy, not from the comfort of another city, but from a prison cell, quite possibly under a death sentence. His near-term fate is far from certain, but his long-term vision is secure. As the old saying goes, he does not know what the future holds, but he knows who holds the future. The tension between joy and grief can be seen in the last sentence. When Paul prays for the peace that passes all understanding to "stand guard" over all of their hearts and minds (4:7), he is using the term most commonly used for the job of the soldier stationed outside his cell. It is not the one who represents Roman imperial authority that is keeping watch over me, Paul says; it is God's *shalom*—God's powerful protection, will, and purpose. This is the promise that we claim in the face of suffering, loss, and grief.



We are to speak truth to power but also to pain. Our message is that God is stronger than evil and injustice and death.



At the heart of the church's mission is the proclamation of the promises of God to a broken and hurting world. We are to speak truth to power but also to pain. Our message is that God is stronger than evil and injustice and death. Paul writes eloquently about this from the individual as well as the cosmic perspective. In his earliest letter, he writes to reassure believers who are grieving more than the death of family and friends: "But we do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Paul affirms that all will grieve when they suffer loss, but he is convinced that those who trust in God grieve *with hope*.

What exactly is that? As a Pharisee, Paul was likely among those Jews who believed in the resurrection of the dead. He found this hope in the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and their vision of a promised day of God's vindication of Israel. But for Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus brought that far-off promised day into the present. Christ is the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The resurrection of Christ is the down payment on God's promise. Trusting that, Paul believed, transforms believers to live as resurrection people: free from fear, free to experience what John 17:3 calls "eternal life" or life abundant here and now.

The promise of God is personal; it is a source of comfort as we grieve the deaths of those we love and a comfort as we face the prospect of our own death. But it is more than that. Resurrection is not only about life beyond death for us as individuals; it is nothing short of the transformation of all creation. Paul lays out this cosmic view in Romans 8: the whole creation "waits with eager longing" for the day when it will be "set free from its enslavement to decay" (Romans 8:19–21). The decay to which we and all creation are subject is not just death; it is also sin and injustice in all its forms, which is the fruit of sin. God's promised transformation is the full realization of God's purpose for all creation, which is that all live in harmony and peace, where the well-being of all is assured.

Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from God's love for us—for all people, for the whole creation—in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38–39). These words that conclude the basic argument Paul sets out in Romans are a summary of the good news itself. What we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the triumph of God's love. Love wins, despite everything. Or, to say the same thing in another way, the arc of history bends

long, but it bends toward justice. These words give us hope in the midst of suffering and loss; they provide comfort and consolation at the grave; they empower us to speak up and stand our ground in the face of injustice; they are our guard against despair.

How does the church proclaim this? We teach; we preach; we sing; we pray. Sometimes our message is directed outward, as we seek to invite others in to find hope in the midst of their struggles. Our message is often directed inward, to the church itself. What's the first song we teach in Sunday school: "Jesus loves me, this I know." Hopefully, this is a frequent message in children's sermons, because adults need desperately to overhear it; God loves and God always will. The hymns we sing and prayers we offer build up and reinforce our faith. Study leads us more deeply into the implications of God's grace for everyday life and social transformation. Gathering regularly helps us reflect on how our daily living gives witness to God's love for all. Working together and contributing resources of time and money, we reach out in ministries of service that go beyond what we can do individually. In baptism, we claim God's promise for each child, youth, or adult that they will belong to God forever. In the Lord's Supper, we meet the risen Christ in the breaking and sharing of bread and are strengthened by his presence.

CONCLUSION

The Heidelberg Catechism was written in 1562 as an attempt to bridge some of the growing differences between Calvinist and Lutheran branches of the Reformation. Tensions abounded across Europe as Christians struggled to find their way. In that time of struggle, the authors of this summary of Christian faith chose a profound way to begin. A *catechism* is a teaching tool (or curriculum) in the form of questions and answers. The first question is: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"⁴ *Comfort*: in turbulent times, that is what the pastor-theologians who wrote this catechism knew people needed. Strength. Encouragement. Hope. A way to make sense of life in the face of conflict and death. The answer is straightforward: "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." These words, in turn, became the basis for A Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), adopted in 1991: "In life and in death, we belong to God."⁵ From this, everything else flows.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Cynthia Campbell is president emerita of McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois, where she served for over sixteen years, and pastor emerita of Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky. She served previously as pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Salina, Kansas, and as associate professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. A contributor to *Feasting on the Word* and *Connections* lectionary commentaries for preaching and worship, she is the author of *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity and Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes*. Her most recent book is *Meeting Jesus at the Table* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2022).

4. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999), 4.001.
5. *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, 11.1.

Foundational Essay

© 2023 Growing Faith Resources



What's the first song we teach in Sunday school: "Jesus loves me, this I know." Hopefully, this is a frequent message in children's sermons, because adults need desperately to overhear it; God loves and God always will.



