

Pastoral Care for the Dying and the Grieving

Yung-Suk Kim

I. Introduction

What is life and death? What is the Christian teaching of death? How can faith communities and ministers help the dying people to deal with pain, sense of loss, the fear of isolation, and the dread of letting go? What can we say about grieving? In view of developmental theories, how can dying and grieving be viewed? These are some questions arising out of the concerns of pastoral care with the dying and the grieving people. Partly trying to answer these questions, we will explore to find out how we should care those who are dying and grieving. In doing so, we will know that dying is an extension of living and that even the dying and the grieving people can grow through "remembering and hoping," even in the midst of the most difficult time.

In fact, there are "many faces of death": natural death, sudden death from disease or an accident, death of innocent babies, and death of criminals, and so on. It is hard to say simplistically that all death is good or bad. God's mystery is to be a mystery. We cannot know the whole meaning of dying or grieving. But for one thing, we should know that God's love is stronger than death or grief. Since all aspects of death and grief cannot be covered here, thus in this paper, keeping in mind those questions raised in the beginning, our main discussion will be centering around dying at an old age and with their grieving families around them.

II. Cultural bias against dying and grieving

In our culture (Korea) death and grief are rendered shame, which carries a negative image such as vulnerability, weakness, yielding to destiny, vanity, and curse (not blessing), etc. This negative image has been so much embedded in our hearts and minds that pastoral care for the dying and grieving has not been carried out well. Death and grief have been dealt light or easily comforted with a cliché. However, the deeper meaning of dying and grieving should be illuminated. A deeper meaning looks like a "paradox" that life is gain and loss, sadness and joy, moment and eternity, limit and limitlessness, and change and growth. This paradox tells us that life is not monolithic, simplistic but mysterious and profound; it is God's.

III. Theology of dying and grieving

A Brief Statement of Faith (1983) of Presbyterian Church (USA) begins with "In life and in death we belong to God." Even in death we belong to God. Whether we walk in the darkest valley or stand at the brink of death, God is still with us through the Holy Spirit. We believe that death and grief cannot separate us from the love of God. God's sovereign love transcends death and grief. Therefore, Christians learn and experience God's loving care in the midst of the most desperate moment of life as such. God suffers with the Christ when he was crucified. God is also with us in suffering and dying and grieving. We experience resurrection in the midst of dying and

grieving.

Dying and grieving is not a mere end of time or a negative thing but an inevitable source of re-creation and reintegration through reflecting on the past, present and future. Dying and grieving must be insurmountably painful but it should be also the time for remembering and hoping. For the dying, this time is the time of final hope in God, the time of letting go, and the time of a new beginning of everlasting life, while for the grieving, this time is the time of reflection, recollection, and re-finding new self through the time of sorrow and pain. On a deeper level, reintegration of life in God happens both in the dying and the grieving. Through our faith-eye, a desperate moment of dying and grieving can give rise to a critical moment of reflection, heart-felt, soul-search spiritual time, re-orienting our energy to the sense of community, asking our limitedness but thanking our life together.

Take a moment and think about the puzzlement of death itself. What can we say about the question of why human beings have to die. What does dying mean in Christian faith? The story in Genesis tells us that humans die because of sin (Gen. 1:3). However, the Bible does not have a single voice about death: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). So according Gen 3:19, our bodily existence does have an end because it is made of dust, which means decaying just as nature goes that way. From another angle, then physical life of limitedness can be a blessing of God from the beginning. If our life is blessing, a gift of God,

dying itself is also a gift of God. Human mortality (physical, bodily being) and temporality can be part of God's creation and God's gift. Therefore, it is not something that we have to overcome but a reality that we have to appreciate and live fully as limited being. Then some will ask: what follows death? Does everything end with death? An answer is no. Dying is no end; it is a new beginning in God.

Similarly, if our life is limited, having physical limitedness, we can have moments of grieving as part of our life too. Life is a "process of attachment and detachment." The "genesis of grief lies in the inevitability of both attachment and separation for the sustenance and development." Grieving is a normal process to reintegration, and is releasing oneself from grief.

IV. How to care (Actual consideration for effective caring)

1) Faith community's ministry

Pastoral care is a ministry of the faith community (church). The caring community's presence for the dying is very important because through this presence the dying people are comforted and get connected to God. Often times the "business" of the dying and the grieving people is considered only ministers' job in the faith congregation. Ministers alone are not enough to cover that ministry because the church as a beloved community should be part of that business. There are many things that the community and the dying people can share with one another such as loving

memories of the church, reflection on the church and special experiences of the faith journeys.

Therefore, regular visits and prayers from the church should be encouraged; they are very important to the dying and the grieving because through those care they find a new meaning of life and death, and grow both personally and communally. It is true that all men and women are born into a community and in the same way they die through the same community. Especially in the church, we believe that each member cannot exist apart from the main body of community and that our lives have a meaning in that community.

Christian practice of "dying well" is closely related with the Christian community as seen above.

Furthermore, the faith community is an organic body which grows and changes over the time.

This community can grow by being with the dying and the grieving.

2) By "remembering and hoping"

Pastoral specialists emphasize the importance of remembering in dying and grieving. Why is remembering so important? The reason is the fact that God remembers us when we remember the pain of the past. God hears the cries of the people in Egypt (Ex 3:7). God remembers our finitude and our pain. It is so powerful to know that we are remembered by God. Thus, the first message to the dying and the grieving is to convey this God's remembering grace and comforting, soft hands. Patton in his book, the pastoral care, put well: "the central theme for the pastoral care is

being remembered and remembering."

The second reason is found, furthermore, in this statement of Patton that leads us to see another dimension of "remembering and being remembered," that is to say, it is like "flashback" in a screen where persons' past are reviewed and reflected. Good and bad memories should surface so that listeners and speakers together pray, sing, forgive and are forgiven, give thanks to God for a given life and God's remembering of us. Through this process, the dying recover or strengthen their faith and their relationship with God.

At this moment, ministers and congregation members who visited the dying and the grieving should hear well rather than talk much to comfort them; healing and reconciliation happen during this time of listening. A good way of remembering is done by story-telling. Story teller's "autobiography" helps the dying person to remember the past, to give thanks to God for a given life, to let go of the self, pain, loss, and fear through handing all burden over to God, who remembers, accepts, loves us in the midst of dying, and beyond death. Even death cannot engulf us, as Paul strongly affirms, "neither death nor from the love of God" (Rom 8:38-39). Autobiography does not stop without affecting others sitting around the dying person. This autobiography affects the grieving and the congregation, and the grieving and congregation write "biography". They reinterpret the dying event and to relate it to their lives in such a way that they live in connection and continuity with the past.

One thing still lacks in the above discussion. "Remembering and hoping" go hand in hand. Through remembering God's goodness, the dying, the grieving and the community see a new hope in God. Hope is, in fact, inseparable from love and faith. Remembering God's love through faith in God gives rise to hoping for the future beyond death. If we do not have hope, we are like persons in a boat without a rudder that would not find a safe port. Faith realizes the fact unseen, and hope visualizes our faith. Therefore, even in a death bed, we have to remember God's faithfulness with faith and hope.

3) Rituals

The importance of rituals should not be overlooked in the process of dying and grieving. We live in a paradox of "moment and process." Moment of rituals cannot be isolated from the process. Both moment and process is important; moment gives meanings to the process of dying and grieving.

Our inner heart can be well expressed by rituals. We have to give opportunities to the dying and the grieving in order that they express themselves. this kind of places are provided by the time and space of rituals. This kind of moment is very crucial because for the dying they need time and space to close their lives through reflecting on themselves with God's mercy and with the faith community as well.

In general, our church tradition in a Korean context is very poor in this regard, that is to say, the importance of rituals has been disregarded by our lack of understanding. I think this lack of understanding has been partly caused by the early Korean churches, which cut elements of ritual in traditional religions and culture in Korea. Virtually, they rejected almost all (because they were confused between culture and the gospel) cultural traditions. Part of our culture is Buddhism, Confucianism and Shamanism, which emphasize rituals along with practicality in their mind and heart. Our old and good tradition of rich rituals can be retrieved to the faith communities so that the dying and the grieving might fully express their whole spectrum of "being." Through rituals we create space and time for the dying and the grieving, with the community included. For example, in a funeral service the whole community gathers to celebrate the life of a dying person. Story-telling (biography), singing, praying, scripture reading and reflection on the scriptures are all important community moments of rituals. Of course, rituals are not everything, or one-time event which can satisfy all people. After rituals, grieving continues and might go deeper in their sadness, which can paralyzes the grieving families. Thus, continuous caring is necessary to the grieving family after the funeral service.

V. Toward congregational education (Growth through change)

As mentioned earlier, pastoral care is a ministry of the faith community. It is essential for the

faith community to be equipped well for understanding dying and grieving. Thus, congregational education should be emphasized and done in the congregation. And later on, it is to be practiced in those moments of dying and grieving. The first thing to remember is that we have a theology: we grow through changes, though changes are painful. Even with one step further ahead, Fowler put it: "faith and the dynamics of change is the law and necessity of our expanding universe." Like seasonal change, diversity and beauty of nature is made possible through the change of season. Change into older body and dying into pain is harsh fact that people do not like. Ultimate change of death and a bitter feeling of loss of the loved one is too cruel to understand. But eventually we believe that even in the darkest valleys God listens to us, we are embraced by God's hands.

Everybody inevitably dies someday, someplace and somehow, and death and grief cannot be dealt lightly; rather, they should be dealt rightly by the dying, the grieving and the faith community, and should be reinterpreted in a way that even in the time of dying and grieving we are not alone and that through this difficult time we grow together, while thanking God for a temporal life, hoping for a new life in God.

Another point of educational point is to focus on God's love beyond death. Eternal life and hope in God are always important in Christian faith. Especially, in times of dying and grieving, unwavering faith and hope is tremendously important. With this preparation, members

are not alone, and continue to live in hope.

VI. Conclusion

So far the positive side of grieving and dying has been reaffirmed. We, Christians believe in God's unchanging love and goodness. No matter how dark our lives would be, we know and experience that God is with us, even in the very moment of dying and of grieving for loss of the loved one. God's caring presence is the ultimate source of our comfort. Dying and grieving are necessary part of our lives, even though we do not invite them. Dying and grieving should give rise to growth in life.

The importance of story-telling and rituals were also emphasized. Through the notion of moment and process, the grieving can be cared and remembered by the faith community. The faith community as a whole should work together with the dying and the grieving. In this process of grieving and dying, the community itself has a new chance of growing, not to mention the grieving families. In light of the importance of the faith community, education for congregation is also very important. We are challenged to be part of this foremost ministry around the dying and the grieving. What else is so urgent but the sheer reality of dying and grieving?