

Using the energy in grief.

Talk given at the St Herman Youth Conference, December, 2017, Kansas City

In the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

I want to tell you today about the *energy* that is in grief and how to use that energy.

We have talked about salvation a lot so far. This talk about grief is also about salvation because there is no salvation without grief.

I want to ask you some questions. These are rhetorical. You don't need to raise your hand, I'm not trying to embarrass you, I am just trying to get you to think.

Have you ever hated yourself or been ashamed?

Have you ever been really unhappy?

Have you ever been really dissatisfied about something?

Have you ever been depressed?

Have you ever wished you were a different person?

Have you ever experienced a bad long term, or even a short-term situation and you didn't see any way out of it?

Have you ever been really, really sad?

Or have you experienced great loss, or losses?

All of us experience grief, and the attentive Christian experiences grief every day, and uses its energy.

Everybody should know the Psalm: “By the waters of Babylon”¹. It is about using the energy that is in grief.

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Sion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof did we hang our instruments. For there, they that had taken us captive asked us for words of song; And they that had led us away asked us for a hymn, saying: sing us one of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

Here comes the energy, that is, using the energy.

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten. Let my tongue cleave to my throat, if I remember thee not, If I set not Jerusalem above all others, as at the head of my joy.”

There is more to that psalm but I want to just focus on this part. It shows that there is energy in grief. This is all I really want to convince you today, that there is energy in grief.

I want to tell you first about the most important kind of grief that you should feel; every Christian should feel it. If we don't have this grief we won't get anywhere in life. That's an absolute. All other grief should be a derivative of this grief.

Life should be an ascent, it should be us getting better. We were born to ascend. It is a consequence of God making us, because He loves us, in His own image so that we can attain to His likeness. In this life we can be pretty low, with sadness, grief, problems in life, weaknesses, or stuff that is just plain old messed up. But we were not created by God to have sadness, grief, problems in life, weaknesses, or stuff that is just plain old messed up.

A true Christian must feel grief because of this dichotomy – what we were born for and who we are right now. Christianity is all about becoming like God because the God-man became like us. When a person tries to do that, they see constantly how far away they are from that goal. And that is the primary source of grief and mourning in this mortal life.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, grief and mourning entered into the world. Scripture tells us that the world even groans from that day.²

So, one of the first things I want to do is convince you that grief is a consequence of living in the world. Don't be afraid of it, don't run away from it. If you don't have grief and mourning, then pure and simple, you're just not doing life right.

I don't want get to get too technical with you here, but because we were made in the image of God we have attributes that are like God.

We have **desire**, we have **knowledge**, we have **will**.

You can also think that **will is energy**, that is -- **energy to do things that you want to do**.

Of course, God has perfectly strong will and He can do anything He wants, but we have weak wills and only with God helping us can we do anything good.

Grief and mourning are that energy to help you to do good.

I'm telling you a story that the world doesn't want to tell. They don't understand it. The world thinks of grief and mourning as terrible things to be "recovered" from.

People say things like "it'll take time", or they try to distract a person from their grief, or they are afraid to talk to a grieving person about the object of their grief, as if not thinking about something that has shattered your life is going to make you feel better, or get better.

That's not a Christian point of view.

I have told you already that grief is energy. There's positive and there's negative energy. Fire can destroy; it can burn up, or fire can make things warm and can help you to see, with light. Grief is just like that. Grief cannot go away unless it transforms. Grief that transforms eventually brings us to the point where there is no grief. There is only happiness, there is only God, there is only being in God and knowing God. Grief that does not transform will always destroy, or at least hurt you. It's never good to have grief that does not transform, *ever*.

That's really about all I really have to say to you. The entire point of this talk is that you use the energy that is in your grief.

Now if you believe me about that, then all I need to do is talk about the various kinds of grief, (and there's a lot of it, different kinds) and what to do about harnessing and using the energy that is in that grief.

Many of you have encountered grief about a lot of stuff. All of you should -- or if you have not had this experience, should learn to - experience the daily grief and mourning because God made you to be perfect, and yet, you are still a sinner.

Your sin should cause you grief and the energy of lamenting your sins should bring you to repentance and to try harder.

It doesn't matter how sinful you are, or how habitually you sin, if you have grief for your sin -- another way of saying that is "*repentance*" -- God will never abandon you, He will always help you, and eventually you will be free of your sins, and all grief.

I understand that there's complicated things and sometimes you don't know what to do. But if you have that component of always having grief over, or mourning over your sins, with repentance, you God will help you – it will come out in the end that God will help you.

I am going to give you some other examples of grief now. Some of these things are really hard, and this is a dangerous part of this talk, but I decided I had to mention these things out loud. I do not want to make things harder for you, but the only way to get better with grief is to use its energy, to know it and to face it and you cannot get better if you do not talk about it, or if you do not face it.

If you feel a pain in your heart from some of the things I am about to say, don't shrink from the pain, but find a way to transform it. You have people you can talk to in this room; talk to somebody today, tomorrow, the next day. Talk to me if you want to. I don't have anything to offer you as far as intelligence, but I do have experience.

People can have grief because:

- they are confused about their life situation,
- or about relationships with people,
- or their sexuality,
- or that they don't feel God when they pray,
- or they had an abortion,
- or they were raped or sexually abused,
- or they lost a loved one,
- or a loved one has cancer and is suffering,
- or their parents are getting divorced,
- or there is always fighting in the house, or abuse, or dysfunction,
- or a loved one committed suicide,
- or they are lonely,
- or because of addictions - to drugs or alcohol, or sex, or whatever,
- or they have done a terrible thing, and they are ashamed,
- or just simply they feel that they are just messed up, and will continue to mess up and things are messed up.

There are a million things in this fallen world that bring us grief. Sometimes you have grief because of your sinful desires. For example: maybe you are unhappy because you do not have a lot of money, or you are not as pretty as you think you should be, or as smart, or as popular as you think you want to be.

No matter whether grief comes: if it is from our environment, or if it's from things that happen to us, or if it's from our own sins -- *it has energy*.

I can speak with authority about this because I have experienced grief.

From the time I became a Christian, I have lived with constant grief because I know that I was made to be like God and a lot of times I do not act like that that, and I get involved in stuff that I shouldn't get involved in, or think stuff that I shouldn't think.

That grief - and its energy - motivates me to pray and fast, and to do good stuff sometimes when I don't feel like doing it.

I've experienced another kind of grief that all the clergy here, and you also should feel.

This is when there are people who are not doing well and you want them to do better.

Somebody could have mental problems, spiritual problems, addictions, relationship problems, health problems, and they're not doing well. And you really care about them.

Feeling grief regarding people is what gives you energy to help them.

It does not matter if you are strong or weak, smart, or not so smart or you have it together or you don't have it together – none of that stuff matters – if you care about people and you feel grief when they suffer, then you must do something. Feeling that grief in a positive way will help you to do something.

I want to tell you **secret**; there are a lot of secrets in the Christian life. They are secrets not because they are hidden – they are in plain sight – they are secrets because most people don't **understand** them very well.

When you feel and you even **choose** to feel, or you even seek out the grief of others -- **your grief is less**.

Your suffering is less. Everybody in this room who is clergyman knows that to be true. And you should know it to in your life experience. When you seek out the grief of others, and try to help them, your grief is less.

Many of you are very young, and I am not telling you to be crusaders and help everybody there is about every problem, because you will surely tire yourself out and fail. But it's about opening your eyes, seeing the needs of others and responding, however you're able to.

Some of you know that I experienced deep grief this summer.

On June 11, my son Daniel, died. He was 20. He drowned in a river in Germany. He was on a college trip. He was doing something that was crazy at the end, before he was going to go to Czechoslovakia. Today, it is 200 days since his death and yes, I do keep track. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of my son 100 times and sometimes those thoughts are happy but I will admit to you that often times they are said are sad. But I also that I pray for my son multiple times in the day, formally and informally. So, when I think of him, I pray for him, but also formally. Don't fall into the trap that you should pray for somebody when you think of them, formal prayer is also critical, in dealing with in grief and in dealing with life in general. If

If I only thought about Daniel, and I did pray for him, then I would be ignoring the energy that is in my grief, and I guarantee you that I would be messed up.

Because of my son's death, I've kind of made a deal with him to collaborate with him. This is my way of giving meaning to his early death, which is very early, 20 years old, and using that energy that is in his death.

My grief has given me the energy to help others with similar kinds of grief, and worse. I very aggressively have told people about Daniel, and I started online called "Daniels list" – some of you are on it – it is a prayer list, it has people who have suffered great losses, it has those people who have died in sudden ways, and also people to pray for Daniel.

I pray for everyone on this list every day and commemorate them in every liturgy. Now, it's a long list, and sometimes I don't feel like doing it, but I do it. Sometimes it isn't exactly like angels are singing in heaven like I do, sometimes it feels pretty flat, but I do it. That's because of that energy, because I made him a promise, so I'm fulfilling my promise.

I've learned a lot about people who suffered sudden deaths of loved ones, including suicides - there's a lot of them on that list. Because of my grief, I can understand their loss. I can be authentic when I talk to them, and I can be authentic when I pray for them. This is because of that **energy** - that is the **energy of God** - that is His **grace** - that is in my grief.

I will tell you another personal story. Right after we finished Daniel's funeral, so still in the church, pounding the last peg in the coffin, and moments later, maybe five minutes later, I received a phone call from the fiancée of someone I take care of in the prison. He has given me permission to talk about him, and in fact, he's even told me to name names. His name is Ignatius, his son is David. 11 years old. 11 years old, and he had such pain of heart, that he hung himself. And he loved his dad. And he thought his dad might be getting out soon, but there was just too much pain, too much dysfunction.

Ignatius didn't know.

So, I was going to pray the Jesus prayer all the way down to bury my son. Is very that it monastery that is near us. We go visit him at least every month and celebrate the liturgy, my wife stays overnight, and then I come on Saturday morning and celebrate the liturgy, and go to my son's grave. So, I was going to say the Jesus prayer, which is sort of the thing to do, wanted to pray for him while we were going down. Why did pray for them during that time. I was on the phone, calling, getting permission to go down to the prison the next day, which is very out of the ordinary. On Saturday they do not want they do not want clergy to come, that's a family visitation day. Well, I got permission from the warden. Ignatius did not know what I was coming.

I went to the visitation room, I meet his fiancée and his sister. We are in this little anteroom were all the snack machines are. Now prison is not a place where people are up totally sad all the time and walk around like they are in Hell or anything, but is not a place for people jumping up and down the time either. In the visitation room, people are jumping up and down. There is this happiness, you can see it, you can taste it – it's all there. People are seeing each other for the first time in a while, smiles are everywhere, truly there is just this great happiness. But we were in this anteroom, and he was going to walk through all that happiness, and then he was going to see me. And when he saw me, he would know that I don't belong there, I was the canary in the coal mine, I was the Raven or the owl and a tree. And He saw me, any started to cry, all of us cried. We didn't say a word for 10 minutes, we just embraced and cried. And then we talked, and we told him the truth. It was a great blessing to be able to share someone's grief. It not me out. I went home and serve vigil in a daze, but it was right thing to do, going to see him.

There is energy in helping someone that has grief similar to yours. I think his is worse! It was good to get a prison in a couple years. His son is not there for him anymore. The things he would've done with his son he is never going to do.

But he's a really good man, and he has listened to me. He is using that energy in his grief. There's another man in prison. Ignatius is the kind of guy who is like a buddy of mine who talks about always going after the lambs with have bum legs, and so he does that too, and he found a man whose son died in a terrible way in an accident with criminal neglect following. The boy shouldn't have died, but he did. He came and he talked to Ignatius and me and the things that I said to him are like the things I'm saying to you and they were revolutionary to him. And, hopefully things are going to work out for him.

I think it would be a very good thing if you had something like Daniel's list. You could pray for people who've suffered great losses, or died suddenly or maybe they're suffering abuse or maybe people that have had abortions, or maybe people that have drug addictions, or whatever resonates in your heart, you put those people in your list, whether by name or just by general category. I have people that I pray for by general categories, about 50 different things, every day. So, I advise you to do something like that, because then you look outside yourself. And don't say, well my life is so terrible because of this and this and this, but rather that by the grace of God, God lives in my heart, and because of that my heart reaches out to others even those that I don't know. That's very important.

Now Since I'm a pastor I know that what I just said might've made some of you inwardly groan a little bit. The reason why is because A lot of you, and even most of you might have trouble doing any kind of consistent prayer. Most you have trouble especially praying for a list of people consistently. It's kind of dry; it's kind of hard to do. Maybe you pray for your immediate family. You must get over it. You need to get over not praying enough. You work at. You need to start doing better, there's just no other option.

If you start trying to do better, you will be so good at first. Maybe you will be terrible at it, but you will get better. But you won't get better if you won't try to get better.

I want to take a minute to tell you right now about how to talk to someone who has had a terrible loss. A lot of people have no idea how to do that and they are afraid to talk to someone. So, they often avoid it – because of, that's less face it, a little cowardice -- and they want to avoid the elephant that is in the room. Well I will tell you something, from my perspective, you can't surprise me by telling me something about Daniel. You can't make me think about him suddenly, that just won't happen, it's just not possible. Now when people are trying to avoid thinking about somebody that they've lost, or some source of grief, then sometimes people can fall to pieces when you mention someone to them, but that's because of them being dysfunctional in dealing with their grief.

So, don't be afraid to be empathetic with someone with their grief. But you don't necessarily need to say anything, you just need to be present. You just have to care. You just have to be there for them. You don't have to be witty, you don't have to come up with anything. Just feel. And if you pray for people, and pray about the terrible things in this world – God please help us not to have these terrible things – if you pray and you have that heart, then you won't be confused about what to do. You will just do it. Whether you say something, with the give someone a hug, whether you embrace them and cry for 10 minutes, whether you suggest that they talk to this person or that person, whatever happens, it will happen naturally. But you must really care first. So, don't be afraid of encountering someone who has grief. Just do the best to be there for them.

When I went down to see Ignatius, I didn't think anything, except to pray for him the whole way. I had no idea what I was going to do. It just happened.

You have this capacity. You know that this terrible stuff in this world. You know it is a terrible tragedy that this stuff is in the world. So, become accustomed to lamenting these tragedies and pray about these tragedies, even about people you don't know. Then you will know what to do.

Since helping Ignatius, I can really understand about energy in grief. These kinds of ideas have been percolating me for a long time. And I can see that I have something to give to people – such as Ignatius.

By the way it's a personal preference to me – it makes me crazy when people say "how are you doing now", or "how are you doing with the Nativity season. That's a hard question to answer, any day of the week. How I'm doing is that sometimes I am doing good, sometimes I'm doing not so good. I'm always fighting. I'm not just sitting around being miserable, and I am actively - not passively - waiting for the day when there is no sickness nor sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.

Now, because I feel the grief of losing a son in a sudden way, I understand when people have lost someone, especially in a sudden way. I am responsible for that knowledge, for that experience! I am responsible for that energy! That's why I pray for people that have lost their loved ones or died suddenly. If I didn't do that I wouldn't be using that energy that God has given me, which is his presence, his active, substantial, understood experienced presence in my life, and if I didn't do that I would be really messed up.

So, I am going to ask you, what are you doing with your grief.

Maybe things are hard at home, or you are confused about this or that, or one of your loved ones is a drug addict. What are you doing about it? What you'd better be doing, is using the energy that is in your grief to pray for them, or if the grief is regarding yourself for yourself. It always comes down to prayer. Prayer is the beginning, the middle and the end of everything you do. With prayer God sees that you're serious, and then He helps you to be creative. Prayer is not the only solution, but it is the only thing we can do to find a solution. There's a lot more to do than just pray for people, when you have grief regarding them, but it starts with prayer, and, as I said above, the middle is prayer, and the end is prayer. Without prayer, there is just sadness, there's just dissipation.

So, I hope this is not too theoretical for you. So, want to give to some practical examples.

I admit to you that it easier to be with someone has lost a son when you already lost a son. But even if you have not had a loss that is like the one whom you want to comfort, you should already know about grief and be able to empathize.

I hope this is not too theoretical for you. So, I want to give you a few practical examples.

I know somebody; her mother had two children, and she was the second. She found out later in life that her mother had had several abortions in between her oldest sister and her. She obsessed about this; she lamented about this. She wondered, "do I have brothers or sisters – which? – will I ever see them?" She was really messed up over this. And then she started to pray. She prayed for her mother, she prayed for her father, she prayed for others who had abortions. She prayed for those who are considering abortion. She prayed that she would see her brothers and sisters. And this has brought her peace, and she's not messed up anymore, she's not obsessed anymore. She continues to pray in this way.

If your parents are going through a divorce or have been divorced, or there's fights in the house or whatever else, you have grief about it, and this will tear you up, and be of no use whatsoever, to you unless less you pray for everybody involved, even if you are mad at them – actually especially if you are mad at them. Once you are mad at, pray for first, pray for the most. The ones that have hurt you the most, pray for the most. Absolutely, God will help you to look to yourself and maybe there our other things He will show you to do.

So, no matter what your grief, other people are going through the same thing. I have a prayer list of people to prove it.

A fundamental principle is this: **if something gives you grief, pray for others who have the same grief.**

Do you have grief because you are lonely? Pray for lonely people. Grief because you lost your virginity, pray for those who have lost their virginity. Grief because you've mess something up? Pray for the people who have messed things up. That is very important.

I have known a lot of drug addicts in my day. Pretty much every single one of them grieves over lost time. Sometimes they become obsessed over lost time, and they make poor decisions because of that because they are trying to do things too fast. Now if they used that grief over the lost time, in a productive way, they can become a force for good.

They can be like that first son – we are like that first son, or we had better be like that first son, don't be like the second son. The person when his father said go work in my vineyard and said I'm not going. But later on, he repented and went. The second son said I'm going to go but he didn't go. Regarding the one repented and worked, it is said of him that he did the will of his father. We are like that son. We don't do stuff, and then, hopefully, we start to do it.

If you mess something up, or something is messed up, you can do something to un-mess it up. Or you can stew about it, or you can just grieve without purpose, or you can have dysfunctional behaviors because of it – it is your choice. It's not wrong to lament over lost time, to be ashamed over something you did, or to lament over any loss – it's not wrong to do that. It's wrong to do that and do nothing else.

Here's an incredible example of a woman I know who took the energy that is in her grief and made it into something profoundly powerful. She is a Hindu; her name is Pritt. She was living with her mother and father and brother. Her brother was mentally ill and she came home one day and there was blood everywhere. He had killed his mother and father and himself. She came home to that. It was crushing to her. What would she do? Well, she decided she had to do something with the pain inside of her. She had some skills, and so decided to help indigent people a neighborhood with home repairs. And because of the kind of work she did, she worked for FEMA for a while, she knew how to read mobilize resources. She started eight years ago with 12 people, and this October I was one of the workers and there were 200 people. Besides this she does clothing drives and food drives. Before we begin the work, she talks about her experience. Sometimes she cries. But there is energy in this woman. There's a certain

gracefulness in her, there's a strength in her. She experienced having terrible, and she did something about her pain.

By the way the name of the organization is "Our Seva". This is a Hindu word; it basically means "selfless service" and has with in it the idea of thanksgiving. Now is a Hindu world, but it's surely a Christian concept is in it? To have selfless service out of Thanksgiving? Because your parents died? Yes, that's what she does.

You don't need to be talented, or have special skills, or be intelligent, or anything -- to utilize the energy that is in your grief. All you need to do is try.

Hopefully you all know the prayer that the priest says at panikhidas. I say that prayer at least four times a day. You should understand this prayer, because it talks about the end of grief.

Here's the part that I want you to brand in your heart. Remember this. I don't mean with your head. I don't mean, write it down and remember all the words. I mean remember what it means in your heart. This is what we are praying for people.

"give rest of the souls of thy servants, a place of light, place of green pasture a place of repose whence all sickness and sorrow and sighing are fled away."

Imagine how many times that prayer has been said! It's been prayed by saints, it's been prayed by sinners. Maybe it's been prayed, a million trillion times. God hears prayers that are pleasing to Him. This prayer is certainly pleasing to Him.

Do you understand it? Did you hear it? When God answers this prayer, that means especially that, the sorrow and sighing, that is the grief that occurred in this world will no longer give them pain in the next. Now I don't know, I've never been able to discern this, never read anything that's told me, maybe we don't remember it, or maybe remember it like a mother remembers the pain when she gives birth to a child. It doesn't give her any sorrow that she felt that pain.

That's was going to happen for those who are in registers. No pain, no sorrow, no sighing. The could happen to you Christian. It could happen to those you praying for.

All my life, even if I live to be 90, I will still think of my son and will feel pain. I'm still waiting to see him again. I'm still hoping that he's okay. In the next life there won't be any sorrow or sighing, there will be none of that. So, the grief that I have, if I continue to do something right, will all be gone.

That's of course only if I am with the righteous, and you too. If you're not with the righteous, if you're not with the blessed, if you haven't struggled to follow God and have abandoned God, then your grief stays. The promise of this prayer, gives me energy. Not only for my son, but for some of the people that are hurting and so many terrible ways. So, I'm waiting for the day when I don't have any sorrow or sighing – over what goes on in the world over the weaknesses of sins of my friends my loved ones or my own weaknesses. This is the time for sorrow and sighing. The time this world. This is the time to harness the energy that is in sorrow and sighing.

Here is a letter I received recently from someone. I have received a thousand letters regarding Daniel. This is the characteristic one.

"Dear Priest Seraphim, I have learned about your loss only today. Please accept my sincere condolences. I believe that losses and hardships bring us to closer encounter with Christ; and thus, I would ask you to pray for me and for all us because you have come closer to Him, and closer to him than any of us. May Christ always keep you strong for us. My name is Ragy, and I am a Coptic Orthodox from Egypt."

So, now I pray for Ragy - after all he just ordered me to do so. How dare I not do it! I don't have any option, so I pray for him. Actually, I choose not to have an option. I hope you choose not to have option sometimes too. Only God knows where this will lead, for Ragy and for me.

By the way, Ragy is correct. Losses and hardships do lead you to a closer encounter with Christ.

If we have the strength, we should not consider any "loss" to actually be a loss but rather an avenue by which God's grace comes to us in a more substantial way.

I want to tell you solemnly something that I said within days of learning of Daniel's death. If somehow an Archangel came down from heaven and spoke to my sinful self and I somehow knew that it was not a demonic delusion, and that angel said to me: "Seraphim you can take it all back for you and it can be as if Daniel had never died" -- **I would decline.**

It is very dangerous to refuse a gift God is given you. Don't do it. I know for many of you that have grief, and you don't consider it to be a gift, and you might even be angry at me for saying that it is a gift. But everything God does for us, or even allows for us is a gift. It's all a gift from God, it's all in his providence, everything works to the good for those are called according to His purpose.

That's all I wanted to tell you today. I wanted to tell you to expect and embrace grief and use the energy that is in it. Truly, when you use this energy, that God speaks to you, God lives in you and you experience God.

Now, if you have any grief that's overwhelming to you, *talk to someone*. Do it today, do it tomorrow, don't decide to do it later. Don't say, "maybe sometime I'll talk to my priest", and it never happens. But don't just talk to them so usually can "get over it". It's not something to "get over", it's something to transform you, using its energy. So, you're going to have to make some changes.

That's all I have to say to you. God bless you and God help you.

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¹ "By the waters of Babylon", Psalm 136 (sept numbering). This psalm is sung in matins the three Sundays that precede Great Lent.

² (Rom_8:22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now).