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Welcome to my Grief Journal

In these next five to six pages of pouring out my grief, you will read about my emotionally absent father. You will also read about the churches that I am learning to grieve. Thankfully, my God is faithful and a great Healer, so this is not just a grief journal of only sorrow and loss. I am thankful for this opportunity to take this class with you, Dean Walborn, and this opportunity to learn how to grieve well.

One of my previous small group leaders pulled up a quote about grieving and unfortunately, she didn't say who said it. I found a quote similar to how she worded it: "Grief is… in which we grieve losing our romanticized version of reality in order to grasp the reality that we actually have.[1]" This has become the definition of grief that has helped me process my romanticized reality and bring me back to the reality I live in.

My Father

I love my dad. My dad loves me. These things were hard to admit for a long time though. He's not easy to love and he is emotionally unavailable. My dad is a person whose action speaks louder than words and I am a person who feels loved by genuine words of affirmation. In this part of the grieving journal, I want to grieve the dad I've always wanted and wished for. So that I can finally love the dad that he is. I think the most affectionate words I've ever heard from my dad are from the time I was in elementary school and I asked him something about being happy. I don't remember how I asked him or what my exact words were, but I remember what he said. "Of course! Mommy and Daddy asked God for one boy and one girl and God gave us you and

1 Reed-Thomson, Renita. 2022. "Reality, Grief, and Hope." Discipling Marketplace Leaders, October 10, 2022. https://disciplingmarketplaceleaders.org/2022/10/10/reality-grief-and-hope/.

Kevin." My dad's never been one to be intentional with his words. I don't even remember if he's said he loves me, which probably shows how little he's said it.

Growing up, my friends' dads were funny, were able to talk to their children's friends, and talked to their kids about their feelings. When I was younger, my dad felt like a close friend. Sure, he didn't talk much. But he always played with me, danced with me, held me, and laughed with me. Maybe it was because I grew older and more awkward and too girly. He's always been great at bowling, even winning championships. He recently scored a perfect game, which I am actually really proud of.

I've always been not too great at sports. I lacked confidence and energy. I gave up too soon and never challenged myself. My brother, on the other hand, was always confident, always excelled, and ended up hanging out with my dad more. So, my dad is naturally closer to my brother. Maybe because they're also similar to one another. I look back and I wish my dad pushed me more. I wish he asked me to do things he wanted to do. I wish he was able to express that he did want to get close to me. I wish he was better with his words.

When I talked to my counselor about my dad, she noticed that I kept coming back to the conclusion that even though he wasn't the best dad, I know he still loves me. Even though he rejected me when I asked him to teach me bowling, or he took his hand away when I tried to console him after his dad passed away, or he doesn't express his love to me through his words, I still feel like I shouldn't be angry with him.

I don't know if he's tried his best, but it's not like I have never felt that he loves me. My goal with grieving this "ideal dad" is so that I can stop looking for this affection I long for in other men. Though my dad has one of the kindest hearts I have ever known, he's not affectionate nor is he nice with his words. My mom tells me so many things that my dad has done for other

people, that most of my image of my dad is made up of the little things he does for me and the stories my mom tells me about him. That's also frustrating. I don't want my dad to be someone I hear about. I want to know him myself.

I remember falling for any boy that was nice to me. They could ask "how are you?" and I would think they must like me or something for them to ask me a question that my own parents don't ask me. Now that I'm older, I've learned through lots of rejection and humiliation then learning and healing that my heart is worth more than just a simple "how are you?" Does my dad even care about how I'm doing? But just because they care doesn't mean they deserve my heart, because that kind of care can be fragile and shallow. My dad is not a perfect dad. I hear dads say "I'm going to love my daughter in a way that she knows that my love for her is the standard for how she should be loved and cared for." If that was my dad's goal, he succeeded. His lack of emotional care has set the standard for how easy I give my heart away. He loves me, but he loved me in a way I didn't receive it growing up. Only now, after twenty seven years, can I look back and see how he loves me.

The Absence of A Community

This might be the one I need the most at this moment and of course this is the one I push back two weeks to do. Before I start with how my church closed down, I feel like I need to lay down how I lost my first community, my first home church. At the peak of what used to be called "The River," the previous young adult ministry at Bethany UMC, it was a thriving prophetic ministry. Numbers were being added to our congregation every week. People were meeting and being saved by God at the River. Then, The River split when my pastor left to make his own church at Agape. And then Bethany, when I wasn't there, split because the UMC wanted Bethany to be for homosexual marriages and ordaining homosexual pastors and Bethany's senior

pastor at that time was against it. When the UMC kicked him out, half of the congregation followed him when he founded his own church and joined the GMC which many UMC churches are going to join. Then, there was another split at Agape when my pastor from the River left after about 3 months Agape Global was founded and had disagreements and misalignment in vision with his co-pastor.

It's been about a year since my church Agape Global closed down. About half a year before it closed down, I felt called to go back to my old church and help out with their youth ministry. It was difficult to go to both services, the other being forty minutes away, so I just decided it would be better to come back to the young adult ministry at Bethany, which is now called the Covenant. The Covenant at Bethany is struggling now without a pastor, but Bethany was really beginning their struggles back then.

I really liked the lead pastor at Agape. There was something about him that drew me to his preaching and pastoring. He always showed that he was battling pride and fought to stay humble. He stripped himself of his pastor title and allowed his church to call him by his name. He had big dreams; he was compassionate, loyal, hard-working, musically talented, and kind. He was also new to leading a church, but he did it with such humility and love. It was clear to us that ministry was his life. It was also clear to his wife as well. His wife stepped down as pastor mid-way and took on a more administrative role. She explained to the congregation that it was because she wanted to test if her passion for ministry would be the same if it weren't her job to. She was involved in ministry from her early twenties, ever since she became a Christian.

I was a part of her exclusive and intensive women-only small group. We went over soul care and she taught us how to take care of our souls. She made us share our darkest secrets with each other while she shared her sinful past of adultery and shared with us her bitterness towards

her husband whose focus was only on ministry. She also shared that she and my pastor were going through couple's counseling. I really thought she was being honest and letting us see her bare. Little did I know that she was actually continuing to struggle with adultery throughout her ministerial career at our church.

Just like all hidden sins, it was exposed that she was cheating on my pastor with one of the praise team leaders. This praise team leader was also preparing to propose to his then-girlfriend, while also promising another girl to break up with his then-girlfriend. I am fuming with anger and disappointment with these people as I write. These emotions come when I try to grieve this loss of community, loss of a home church to go back to, and loss of a pastor who I had hoped to mentor and shepherd me.

Agape was everything that I felt like I was always looking for in a church. People who were hungry to meet God, we met to pray every Sunday, we truly hoped for this body to be together and one. My pastor was charismatic and also reformed. It was like the perfect balance. I was filled with hope every time I walked in. I was filled with passion to serve and build connections. Worship was always so powerful, but more than the whole worship band playing, I loved it most when my pastor asked me to lead the pre-service with him. It was a time when the people's hearts were prepped for worship. I always felt so encouraged and seen when my pastor would tell me I was always his first choice to lead with him. He would always tell me that he loved leading worship with me. He was the only pastor that ever told me that he saw my heart for the Lord in my raw worship.

I planned on going back to Agape, since the community at the Covenant was struggling and didn't feel like my church even though I basically grew up with most of the members. I'm currently still at the Covenant, because whenever I ask God about leaving, He says He's not done

yet. I don't know why God has me to be the one to stay and see it through. My friends are all looking at other churches and trying to find a church again. Why just me, God?

I feel led to do some prophetic journaling before I finish this grief journal.

God, can I leave Bethany?

God: Not yet.

God, can I leave the English Ministry at Bethany?

God: Do you truly hope for the best for Mark, Elder Dan, Helen, Sang, and Stephany? Can you forgive them for wanting and fighting for what they want in a pastor for themselves? Even if that means they won't be choosing the pastor you want them to hire? Can you have compassion for the English speaking 1.5 generation at the Covenant and can you start to genuinely pray and fast for them?

I'm sorry God. In my fight for the young adults who have already left, I couldn't see the people right in front of me. These people are the ones who are fighting to stay and the ones who are hungry to see You move at Bethany. Help me, Lord, to love these people and to consider them. I was blinded by injustice and anger.

God: Jess, you can leave once you learn to love these people as you love yourself.