

Grief does funny things to people. Have you found that? Grief does funny things to people. I've been doing the work of professional ministry for some fifteen years now, and in those years I have gleaned this one indispensable insight: grief does funny things to people. It makes them do funny things, say funny things. I know what I'm talking about here -- I once got heckled while officiating a funeral.

Grief does funny things to people. It causes us to say funny things, to invariably end up with a foot in our mouths. Maybe none of us should be held too accountable for the things we end up saying in a funeral parlor. Blame it on the grief. Grief does funny things to people.

There is at least one exception, though, I think... one exception to this funeral-parlor-verbal-immunity, this "the grief made me say it" phenomenon. There is at least one exception. I'm taking exception. I'm taking exception to one all-too-common phrase uttered in funeral parlors and at hospital bedsides, our phantom Bible verse for today: "God needed another angel in heaven."

For the past month or so, we've been talking about these "phantom Bible verses," these well-worn phrases that at first might *seem* biblical... but couldn't be further from biblical truth. *Everything happens for a reason. God helps those who help themselves. God never gives you more than you can handle. To thine own self be true.* And now, one more: *God needed another angel in heaven.*

Out of all our phantom Bible verses, this one may be the least likely to be confused with actual scripture -- though maybe if I put in in Elizabethan English, something like "the Lord doth require an angel in the realms above", then it might be more likely to fall into that "biblically ambiguous" column. But regardless, it is often

uttered with a kind of well-meaning certainty, as if conveying something with deep scriptural roots. It is spoken in moments of unusually tragic death, when the loss is sudden or the deceased is young. I mean, what do you say in those moments? Well... some people choose “God needed another angel in heaven.”

Now, church... I’m not a confrontational person, and I (more than most) know that grief does funny things to people, causes people to say funny things. In my life, I’ve never actually called someone out for uttering this phantom Bible verse (as that would just be tacky)... but every time I hear it, I find myself wishing that funeral parlors had bouncers, like nightclubs do. You say nonsense like this, you get bounced.

Why does this phantom Bible verse irk me so? We’ll get to that in a minute. First, let’s clear up a couple of things. One: there is nothing in scripture to suggest that heaven is experiencing some kind of labor shortage. And two: there is nothing in scripture to suggest that heaven would deal with a labor shortage by drafting unsuspecting and otherwise living humans into angelic service.

And we know that, right? So... then why do people keep saying it?

Why? Because death is hard. Death makes us really, really sad. Death really, really hurts. Death makes us really, really uncomfortable.

That much is clear from our first scripture reading for today. In that scripture, Jesus has received word that a close friend, Lazarus of Bethany, brother of Mary and Martha, has fallen ill. Yet Jesus doesn’t rush to Lazarus’ bedside. He waits -- inexplicably, it might seem -- an additional two days before setting out for Bethany. Yet during that delay, Lazarus dies.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he is greeted first by Martha (who is grieving), and

then by Mary (who is weeping). And Jesus is... overcome. Whether it is Mary's tears, or the tears of the gathered crowds, or his own deep grief, Jesus just... breaks down. "Jesus began to weep," the scripture reads (John 11:35, NRSV).

In one sense, there's nothing particularly groundbreaking about this part of the story. A guy who recently lost a friend is sad. He grieves. He weeps. Yet it is groundbreaking, because the guy in question is Jesus. Like, *Jesus*. God made flesh, dwelling among us. He's sad. He grieves. He weeps. These are no ordinary tears.

Now, spoiler alert: in a few verses, Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead. He'll pray and turn to the tomb and say "Lazarus, come out!", and Lazarus will walk right out of the tomb (or shuffle, more like, given that he's still all wrapped up in burial shrouds) (John 11:43, NRSV). In a few verses, Jesus will speak a word, and reverse death, and restore his friend to life.

And that's what makes it groundbreaking. Not the miracle itself (though that is obviously quite extraordinary)... but the tears in light of the miracle. The One who has the power to heal, to restore, to even raise the dead, still weeps in the face of death. The One who knows full well he has the power to reverse death is still overcome by how much death hurts. It's no wonder that we (who are comparably powerless in the face of death) cry and wail and say nonsense things when we're confronted with it.

Sometimes I wonder what Jesus might have done if, while weeping, someone had come over to him, put his arm around Jesus' shoulders, and said "Don't cry, Jesus. God needed another angel in heaven." I can't be sure, but I wonder if we would've had a reprise of that whole 'flipping tables' episode a few chapters earlier. (It's in John chapter two, by the way, if you want to read the story of how Jesus overturned tables in a way

that would rival any Real Housewife of Galilee).

Here in this scripture, Jesus shows us something remarkable... and it's *not* the whole resurrection miracle thing. Here in this brief little verse -- "Jesus began to weep" -- Jesus demonstrates that death hurts and that grief is okay. That it's not the sign of a weak faith. That it's not a deficiency of the human condition. That it is the result of great love. "See how he loved him!" some in the crowd exclaim as they witness Jesus' tears (John 11:36, NRSV). *See how he loved him!* Grief is what love looks like when it is confronted with the reality of death.

But this phantom Bible verse? It doesn't allow space for grief. That's why it irks me so. Grief was good enough for Jesus. Jesus allowed space for grief, but this phantom Bible verse doesn't. It stifles grief. It's not willing to live with grief. It wants to offer a quick comfort that neutralizes grief as quickly as possible. This phantom Bible verse is so uncomfortable with grief, and with death, that it wants to make death somehow fine. Like... *it's alright, God just needed another angel in heaven. So we're all okay, right? It's fine, you're fine, everything's fine!*

Grief is what love looks like when it is confronted with death. This phantom Bible verse is what panic looks like, what discomfort with death looks like, when it is confronted with grief and gets its foot in its mouth. And as the church, the body of Christ, we can do better than that, right? When confronted with death, we can do better than panic and discomfort and a foot lodged in our collective mouths. As Christian people, as resurrection people, as Easter people, we don't have to panic or squirm uncomfortably in the face of death, because we've taken hold of the good news of life and we know that death does not have the last word.

But even more than that: as people who follow Jesus, this weeping, grieving Jesus... we can offer something better than this. We can offer something better than platitudes and phantom Bible verses. We can offer something better, something rooted in the peace that comes from our resurrection hope. We can offer something better.

What can we offer? Our second scripture tells us:

[Romans 12:9-15, NRSV]

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, the apostle Paul tells us, and *weep with those who weep*. That's what someone who is feeling the pain of grief, someone who is confronted with the unfairness of death, needs. Not a platitude, or an empty reassurance, or a phantom Bible verse that seeks to offer a cheap "comfort" rooted in its own discomfort.

Just... presence. The presence of genuine community and unruffled faith. A comforting presence, one that is able to offer real comfort because it's not squirming in its own discomfort. A non-anxious presence that allows space for grief, that doesn't stifle grief, that isn't just trying to neutralize grief, that sits with grief, that (when appropriate) joins in on the grief. *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*.

See, church... grief is going to keep on coming. Until love stops or death stops, grief is going to keep on coming. We can't do anything about that. We can do something about how we respond.

So how will we respond? As people who are so uncomfortable with death and

grief that we fret and squirm and blurt out insensitive and nonsensical things? Or as people who find our quiet confidence and lasting hope in a weeping and risen Savior? With platitudes and phantom Bible verses and cheap comfort, or with comfortable and comforting presence?

It's door number two, church. Paul calls us to it, and Jesus shows us how it's done.

So... "God needed another angel in heaven"? No, church. And that phantom Bible verse is so unbiblical that I can't even wordsmith it and turn it around to say something better. So I'm bouncing it. "God needed another angel in heaven"? That one is officially bounced. Let's replace it with: *If you want me to sit with you, laugh with you, cry with you, rejoice with you, or grieve with you... I'll be here with you. And by God's grace, I'll try not to put my foot in my mouth while I do.*