

What do you say to someone who wonders if they've messed up so badly
that God couldn't possibly love them anymore?

Or what do you say when someone has died?

When someone has suffered the death of a loved one?

I see a lot of advice on what NOT to say,
a lot of lists of what is no longer appropriate to say
to a person who is hurting.

I'm sure you know the list of what NOT to say. What have you heard?

"It's all part of God's plan."

"God just needed another angel in heaven."

Even "She's in a better place now" is looked at disapprovingly.

Most of these sayings are discouraged because they imply
that death and suffering are part of God's plan for us.

Or they suggest that faithfulness means we shouldn't be sad.

I don't think anybody ever means it like that,
but sometimes those responses don't give the comfort
people intend them to.



Instead we have landed on 5 simple words: "I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for your loss" IS a good thing to say,
particularly in those brief encounters
when a real conversation isn't possible.

Those 5 simple words express your sympathy,
and if all you have is a second to talk,
then sympathy is all you need to give.

But sometimes you do get to have a real conversation,
an honest conversation with someone going through
a long illness, or death, or isolation,
a real conversation with someone whose life has derailed
for whatever reason.

And in those deeper moments, “I’m sorry for your loss” is just not enough.

Because those 5 simple words have their own theological problem.

They suggest that sympathy is all there is,
that the God who knows what it is to die and to live again
has nothing to offer in this moment.

So...if you get the chance to talk honestly, deeply,
with someone who is really suffering,
what else are you prepared to say?

What are your next 5 words, and the next 5 after that?

Do you have words of hope deep in your heart
that you can offer to somebody who needs them?

Today I want to try and convince you that the words we just heard
in Romans, the words of St. Paul, are the words you should memorize
for just those moments.

I think St. Paul has already written the words you need
when a person thinks they’ve messed up so badly
that God could never love them,
or when a person wonders if death and loss
are going to have the last word.



Paul says that when God raised Jesus on Easter morning,
Jesus was the beginning of God's new creation,
the beginning of the new world that would be healed
from sin and death.

And then Paul says that through the power of the Spirit,
people who have faith in Jesus become what he calls
the first fruits of God's new creation.

And THEN Paul says something even more amazing:
he says that through the power of the Spirit, we followers of Jesus -
us first fruits - actually BECOME part of the family of God.
He says that we become sisters and brothers of Jesus.

Think about that! Jesus is the first born of the new creation,
and you and I become Jesus' little sisters and little brothers.



And what is our job as Jesus' little brothers and sisters?
Paul says in chapter 8 that our job is to join with Jesus in praying
deeply and without ceasing, for the needs of the world.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in
labor pains until now," Paul says, "and not only the creation,
but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption,
the redemption of our bodies."

"...The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

“And God, who searches the heart, knows...the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
according to the will of God.”



Paul can be tricky to follow, so a New Testament professor
named Katherine Grieb puts it like this:

She says the world is crying out - groaning - in pain,
and so in solidarity with the world's suffering, you and I -
those little brothers and little sisters of Jesus -
cry out on behalf of the world,
and when we cry out the Spirit cries out with us
and together we all cry out to God on behalf of the world.

She says Paul is telling the Church it must be present
where the world is in greatest pain,
and to trust that the Spirit of God is in the midst of the Church
because the Church is in the midst of the suffering.¹



Our calling as members of the family of God is to be in the places
where loved ones are dying, where people are being abused,
where prisoners are being forgotten, where depression and isolation
are ruining people's lives,
where racism, poverty, anger, and resentment
are tearing away our hope in God's new creation.

¹ Grieb, Katherine. “The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness,” page 80.

Some of that work is public,
is going out to places that get covered in the news,
but some of that work is as private as your own home,
or as simple as our parish prayer list.



So, back to the original question:
when Jesus' little sisters & little brothers go to the places
where people are suffering,
do you know what to say?

Sometimes you're going to meet people who feel like they've
done something so bad that God could never forgive them.

Or people with so much shame or depression or isolation
that even if they haven't done anything wrong,
they still think that God could never love someone like them.

If you sit with one of these people,
it might be good to remind her that God has felt that way, too.

That God has suffered the same isolation and shame that she feels,
and that God responded to that rejection
not with despair or judgement,
but with a commitment to Easter life.

“If God is for us, who is against us?
God did not withhold his Son,
but gave him up FOR ALL OF US.
Won't also give us everything else?”



More often you'll meet people touched by the death of a loved one,
people wondering if death has closed a part of their life forever,
if the final word of existence...IS death.

In those moments, shouldn't the brothers and sisters of Jesus
have more to say than, "I'm sorry for your loss"?

Not that we would use our words like a bludgeon,
or that we would quote scripture AT someone,
thinking that we have all the answers, that we can fix somebody.

But words that we could offer gently,
words that we could honestly say have made a difference in our lives,
and that we wonder if they might find them useful.

For those tender moments,
I wonder if we should memorize these words from St. Paul:

"Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

(By the way, Paul suffered every one of those things, so he was speaking
from experience.)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord."



This summer we're working on all kinds of offerings
to invite people to become a part of this parish,
and to encourage those of you already here
to deepen your involvement with Holy Trinity.

That's good and holy work.

But the MOST important work only you can do,
and it's almost always done one person at a time.

Because the real work is to pray, to intercede, to groan to God
in the places where the world is in pain,
on behalf of the people who are suffering.

The real work is to share with that ONE person who is hurting
your belief that a new creation is being born,
and that the new creation is for her.

To invite that one person to believe that God has overcome death,
that she can leave her fear behind,
and become a little sister or little brother of Jesus.

Amen.