Grieve With Hope

When one of the partners in a beautiful, longtime, Christ-filled marriage passes, our hearts ache for the partner who is left behind. After settling the necessary details of someone's passing, after the initial flurry of phone calls, sympathy cards, casserole and flower deliveries, and visits from family and friends have faded, the widowed faces an empty chair with an onslaught of missing and loneliness. And while none of us can fill the departed's shoes, the body of Christ is called by God to care for those who are left behind.

In at least three passages, Scripture reminds us that in marriage, the partners are no longer two but that they become one. (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5 – 6; Mark 10-8.) Perhaps that's why the more deeply connected the partners have been, the more Biblically the partners have nourished their relationship, the harder it is for the surviving partner. I read that there are well over 100 Bible verses that instruct us on how we are to treat our marriage partners. In the past few years, I've had the privilege of witnessing several incredible love stories among our extended Church family—stories that have reminded me of how the Bible says we are to serve our partners selflessly by putting each other's needs before our own, and how we are to care for those who are widowed.

This week we will be celebrating the life of one of the members of our extended Church family. Hers was more than a love story. It's also the story of her husband's servant heart. After 36 years of marriage the wife retired and the still-very-much-in-love couple looked forward to playing golf, going out for breakfasts and lunches, playing cards, attending family gatherings, and having adventures together. But apparently God had a different plan. Shortly after retiring, it was discovered that the wife had cancer. The surgeries and treatment that followed were more than tough. Since they left her unable to eat, for seven long years she was fed through a stomach tube four times a day by her loving husband. As her full-time caretaker, he handled her medications, did the shopping and cleaning, cooked his own solitary meals, drove her to endless medical appointments, and sat beside her ready to do whatever he could to make her as comfortable as possible. Not wanting to leave her alone by herself, he gave up playing golf and hanging out with the guys. The depth of his love for his long-time bride was evidenced by all who were blessed to spend time with them. And now, after 43 years of marriage, she has gone to live in her Father's house in heaven, and we witness his deep sadness as he sits beside her empty chair. Our Pastor gently reminds us that even this devoted husband can grieve with hope *(1 Thessalonians 4:13)* knowing that through his cherished wife's belief in Jesus, she is now in a place that is filled with a love and goodness that we, in our earthly bodies, can't even fathom—and that one day, this loving couple will be reunited in the Kingdom of God.

Each of us grieves differently. Some people need quiet; others long for company with whom they can share memories; some want to only be with close family or their closest friends; others crave diversion so they can stop thinking for a while. It can be hard to know how to be sensitive to those differences. When we don't know what will be helpful, what to ask, what to say, or how to say it, there's one way we can always be assured of being supportive. We can lift those living with an empty chair up in prayer. Psalm

34:18 says “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” *(New International Version)*. And so, we can never go wrong when we pray: Father, I pray in Your Son Jesus Christ’s name that You will stay close when the widowed feels lost or abandoned. Amen.