

NAME YOUR GRIEFS AND GIFTS

The year 2020 is destined to go down as the one of the most challenging years in most of our lives. There has been the ongoing world-wide pandemic we are all dealing with; and who can forget the economic, educational, racial, and political turmoil we've experienced. To say nothing about being physically separated from our family, friends, and church family for months on end. Life, as we've known it, has been severely altered. The level of uncertainty about almost everything has never been higher. Down through the centuries, Christians have dealt with distressful circumstances by gathering together for worship and prayer. But this too has been taken away.

Two Lists

As a way to cope with this ongoing situation, let me suggest developing two lists. Now this little exercise can be done individually; but it's even more beneficial if you can do it with friends or family. One thing is for certain, we have experienced many difficulties and losses this year. Little things and big things. Cancelled trips, parties, plans, get-togethers, graduations, etc. So develop one list called **Griefs**. The second list can be entitled **Gifts**. In other words, make a list of things you are thankful for, even little surprises throughout your day. These are gifts from God that we still have and can still be grateful for. Things like more family time, technology to help us stay connected, being COVID free so far, having time to walk, bike, hike, etc. Why not resurrect that old idea of "Count your many blessings, name them one by one."

The Practice of Naming Griefs and Gifts

Now naming these things is important for several reasons:

1. Naming griefs and losses helps us to be honest about our grief.

We don't have to pretend that everything is fine when it really isn't. We can and should name what we've lost. The Bible encourages this activity and calls it 'lamenting'. There's a whole book of the Bible devoted to it, as well as many Psalms. God knows how much we need to do grieve our losses. To honestly say to ourselves and others, "This stinks! Grief needs to be expressed in order for it to be resolved. Naming something gives us a certain level of control and power over that thing. It makes the unknown and uncertain, more known and certain.

2. Naming griefs and losses keep us from minimizing or silver-lining.

The knee-jerk reaction for many of us is to say, "It's not that bad." In a way, this is an attempt to avoid the pain associated with our losses. But it's not a very helpful first response. Brene' Brown urges us to remove the words "at least" from our vocabulary as we learn to practice empathy. Saying "at least" is a way of minimizing or adding a silver lining around a dark and painful experience. Now exaggerating our problems isn't helpful, but neither is minimizing them. Instead, most of us simply need someone else who will acknowledge that our experience has been sad and painful, and then to just be with us in it for a while.

3. Naming gifts prevents us from drowning in self-pity and sorrow.

We can be honest about what's difficult in life, without getting permanently stuck there. Through extensive research, even secular social scientists have discovered that finding things to be grateful for helps us to better manage the daily struggles and challenges of life. These experts tell us that practicing gratitude increases positive emotions, sleep quality, and overall good mental health.

God already knew this, that why He says in Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

At the very least, naming the gifts we are thankful for helps mitigate some of negative emotions associated with losses. This practice keep us on a better emotional equilibrium – rather than catastrophing everything. Offering up daily thanks to God and to those around us is a healthy spiritual discipline for these difficult times we are living through.

If you are married, I encourage you to take some time and do this little exercise together as a couple. Try to exhaust your list of griefs and gifts in one session. Then check back with each other periodically to see if the list has changed. If you are a parent, you can do the same thing with your children who are old enough. Maybe even put the list on the wall as a reminder. Then touch base with each other once a week to update the list. If you have a friend, reach out and invite them to share these things with you as well.

For the past several years before coming to Nashville, I was involved in a cluster group with about 4 other pastors. We would meet monthly to encourage, support, and pray for each other. One of our common practices was to share "Happies" and Crappies". We would ask each other: What made you happy and brought you joy this past month? Where did you see God's favor and blessing? And conversely, we would ask each other: What was crappy in your life or ministry this past month? What caused you pain or frustration? It's amazing what open, honest dialogue like this in a safe, trusting environment can do for a person's mind and heart. I encourage you to try it with your family or with a small group of friends. As Romans 12:15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." So share your list of losses and blessings, your happies and crappies with each other. It will provide you with emotional strength and support during good as well as bad times