



Time and Tenderness:
A Round Table Conversation on Navigating Grief
August 19, 2026

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Hello, everyone. I am Jennifer Watley Maxell, and it is my pleasure to be here with my colleagues Mark Ramsey, Adam Mixon, and our guest for today, one of our good friends here at TMC, Carla Jones Brown. Carla, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, where you're serving?

Carla Jones Brown: Sure. It is good to be with you all. I am currently serving as the designated pastor at the Oxford Presbyterian Church in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, which is a very long sentence to say: I serve at a wonderful church that is one of the Black Presbyterian churches in the Philadelphia Presbytery. So all of that is significant. And I've been there since January 1st, so we're on seven months. I'm in my third trimester.

Jennifer: You are definitely, and I'm sure you are starting to see some trends and dynamics, now that the honeymoon is over. One of the things that I thought we could talk about is the issue of grief and how it is showing up – not just individually, but how it shows up in systems. And there are a lot of churches right now that are navigating grief, be it that they have lost members who have been advocates, staunch supporters, those foundational presences in the community, whether it is resources that are being lost, communities that are changing, any of the issues of the world that all congregations are having to deal with. And so, what has some of your experience been as a newer pastor in this congregation of grief, and some of the things that they're having to deal with?

Carla: I think the way you frame it is excellent. Interestingly enough, my predecessor was the pastor for 30 years, and she is still around. She's alive and well, and she takes me out for lunch. But one of the things that has become clear to me is it's hard to grieve someone who's still around. So although she retired, and they had been without a pastor for three years, they were trying to find their way because she's still around. How do you grieve the loss of a pastor who is actually still...and when I say, "around", she is around: around town, very visible, involved in people's lives. But what does that do to a system? So the system then bears the weight of the grief.

And that seems to play out in ways, like, "Well, we don't want to call it grieving. So we'll say we're focusing on the budget and how we can fix the budget deficit." The deficit is not the finances. The deficit is something that we have not named, which is that we love this person and we miss her. And 30 years is an extraordinarily long time to be with a group of people. So that's one of the things that I'm noticing, even right now.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I appreciate you calling that out. And the connection that you made immediately to, Jen, your earlier statement about the relationship between change and grief. I tend to think that people aren't really resistant to change as much as we think they are. But I think that, by not naming the grief that's associated with that change, we're skipping a step. We're not addressing something very important that people need to be, kind of, guided through: that relationship between grief and change. Because whatever is the new, it's not the old. No matter how fabulous the new is, it's not the old. No matter how talented and articulate the new is, it's still not the old.

Mark Ramsey: I think that, actually, human beings have a pretty good capacity to deal with change. I don't think any of us have a lot of reservoir to deal with loss. And I think that's the confusion, often, about change and loss. It's loss: it's personal loss, it's personal relationships, it's loss of history or connection. It's, in a church: "I look up and I don't recognize half the people." And when I was at the center of congregational life just a few years ago, I think the pandemic accelerated that sense of loss in profound ways. Interestingly, while almost every congregation learned a good capacity for change, but the loss capacity lagged behind that resilience. And I think we confuse the two. Rarely are people going to show up with a t-shirt that says, "I'm grieving". We've got to dig, in each of us, to find that a little bit.

Jennifer: It's interesting. I was actually doing some reading recently for something else. And I came across this quote by Maya Angelou where she says, "You should be angry. You must not be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer. It eats up the host. It doesn't do anything to the object of its displeasure. So use that anger." I'm wondering if that might also be a cogent word for grief, and how we might think about using grief in congregational work and in the systems that were in.

I'm a pastor as well, and we've been preaching this summer on the subject of joy. And what has really come to the fore is the need to have space for people to name the grief, and to name what is held in tension by joy, because I think joy can be so hollow if we just, kind of, put it out there, like, "Here's the flower called 'joy', just walk around with this flower." That does nothing for us, right? But when you're in a really dark, ugly place and someone hands you a flower, all of a sudden that flower becomes something. It becomes a symbol of hope.

And so, can you think of some of the ways that, maybe, that we've seen grief be a source – I would say – of depth, of helping a congregation to wade through what they're dealing with? Because I think there are a lot of leaders out here that are struggling with, "How do we deal with this whole issue of grief and loss, not just personally, but where we serve?"

Carla: I think – and this might just be too easy an answer – but the fact that we have funerals as a ritual that are steeped in theology is a thing that's helpful for me. So, even when I'm talking to the deacons about, "So this is your role as you're walking this family through, but also this may bring up something for you. This might remind you of your auntie, and it is okay for us to cry as we serve, because that makes us human. And that's the thing that ties us together." Not that we had the best repass (but I will tell you, Oxford does have some good repass meals), not because we were the kindest or the sweetest, but because we know what that pain is, and we don't lie about it. I will never say, "I know exactly what you're going through", because no, I don't, because I have not lost my parents. So I don't know what that grief feels like, but I know what grief writ large feels like. And I know that today, to tell you that, "This is the completion of their baptism", means absolutely nothing. Maybe three months from now it might come back and it might ring true.

Mark: Yeah. Funerals steeped in theology: from your lips to God's ears. I'm sorry. I'm going to be the "you young kids get off my lawn" kind of guy here. But if I'm asked to officiate one more "celebration of life" where the word "death" is never used...we die. That's kind of the whole thing with God: death and resurrection. We literally whistle past the graveyard, or try to; and not just in funerals, but in our general grief. We all know this. When I have experienced grief, and when I've watched others, grieving people are treated as radioactive. Grieving institutions are treated as radioactive, because we might be next. We've got to get a healthier way of using our faith to come face to face with grief and loss and death, and realize, in God's wonderful capacity, that is not the end.

Adam: Yeah, I can't overstate how much I appreciate you all naming this grief thing. Carla, you're talking about following a pastor who's been there for 30 years. I just announced my retirement after 25, and realizing that some of the response, the things that appear to be negative, or the, kind of, little blow ups and things that are happening, being able to name it as grief is going to dictate a different response. If I just say, "This person is acting like this", or "blah, blah, blah", it ignores the fact that they're grieving. And if they're grieving, then, pastorally, I have to respond with time and with tenderness.

There's this great book written by a Catholic clergy way back in the 70s called *Running Through the Thistles*, about leaving a place and walking in a healthy way through it, and how our tendency is to run through that. If there's a patch of thistles and there's no way around it, and you only can go through it, then our mind says, "Run through it. Get through it as fast as you can, then pick them out and be over it." But there is no running through the thistles. Grief requires time. Like you said: maybe three months from now, these words will come back to you, or they'll start to resonate and make sense. But it requires time and tenderness. But we absolutely cannot skip naming that as what most people are dealing with when they come and sit in a pew on a Sunday morning.

Jennifer: You know, I think you're right, Adam. We can't resist naming that. And then, I think, we have a responsibility to attend to it. I think a lot of times, in congregations, when we do name it, we feel like just the act of naming it has some type of healing power. And I do think it does have a type of healing power, to, kind of, get it out of the shadows, and naming something makes it a real thing that now we can deal with. But that still means we have to attend to it. And, I think, figuring out: what are the practices in our particular congregations to attend to that grief? As someone who is walking through a season of grief, personally, one of the things that has been just incredibly powerful is the communion of saints, the people who have hit my inbox daily, "I'm thinking about you. I'm praying for you"; the people who I run into in the grocery store, or when I'm on my way to church, and stop and say, "Hey, I'm thinking about you. I'm praying for you." The fact that they are not just going on with life makes me feel like I'm not alone.

And I think, sometimes in congregations, we name it, and then it's like, "Okay", and on to the next bake sale, and on to the next, and on to the next. And it's almost like we act like the issue never happened. The person never left. We never had the conversation. We never named it. And so, I think figuring out: What are those ways that we then attend to the grief in ways that are productive? And perhaps, as a network, knowing that there are other ministry leaders who are dealing with grief, knowing that there are other congregations, being able to learn from and hold each other in those moments, I think, is a great practice for us as ministry leaders to think about. When we know that another congregation down the street is dealing with the same type of issue that we've dealt with, or when we're in some of these battles together, being able to call our congregations together and say, "Hey, we're all dealing with this issue of" whatever. How do we hold each other in common community for the good of all? – might be one of those ways.

Mark: Yeah, that's really helpful, Jennifer. And it makes me think of two things that are seemingly, I think, contradictory; but I think, in the way God wants us to come toward God in this, are not. One is deeper empathy for everyone who's in grief. I don't care what kind of life they lived, what kind of institution it was. Grief is grief. It is a universal thing. And we have, I think, in large part in the society, lost a deeper well of empathy. And I think that is available.

The other thing is, I think, scripturally, they grieved Moses for 30 days and moved on. So, grief is a season. Of course, grief can revisit us, but part of the grief is not to keep circling the grief, but to mark it.

And, this is what I hear all of you saying, is, "If we actually go toward it, then we can be free to say we're going to hold that in memory. We're going to hold that in the communion of saints, and we're going to move on." In my view, there's too much nostalgia, and that's toxic, and we're off to the races. But to me, the base of all that is a deep and nurtured empathy.

Carla: Mark, I agree. And, I think, also, seeking out the people who are actually doing this work – for example, Rev. Dr. Jamie Eaddy. She calls it "The Ratchet Grief Podcast". This is what she did her doctoral work in. And she calls people together, because people reach out to her. She'll create a community and say, "Hey, here are a bunch of solo pastors who are all experiencing this same thing. Let me pull you all together, give you some tools, create a community, and send you back into your spaces, equipped to, kind of, do your own work and lead the people through their work."

Adam: Yeah. And, to that end, I want to come back to – I like alliteration – the time, the tenderness, the tending to. But then there's this idea of what I think each of you have said a couple of times, is the fact that we have tradition and theology to guide us. We have Scripture to guide us. And oftentimes, we, in reaction to grief, act like we don't have anything to say. And, granted, there is a time to be silent. There is a time for that. But we absolutely do have something to say to the one who's confronted with the worst loss that they could have ever imagined. And that's that, "The worst is not the last." But we don't get to skip that. Oh, man, y'all, this has been super helpful for me in this season, so I'm selfishly grateful.

Jennifer: Yeah. I think this is one of those topics that, again, we don't talk about it a lot. And I think that, where we are in the Kingdom, we're all dealing with various levels of grief. I want to encourage those of us who are in leadership to tend to our own grief, so that our personal grief doesn't manifest in our congregations, our communities, as something destructive or something bitter or something that takes on a life that it's not meant to, because we haven't dealt with what we need to deal with.

To your point, Mark, are we taking our 30 days to navigate our own personal grief and even the personal grief that we're experiencing in our congregations, so that we can be more life giving leaders as we help our congregations navigate grief? Because it is seasonal, and we shouldn't be grieving for 30 years. And if we are in a situation where we've been grieving for 30 years, I hope that we will consider: what are the practices that we can engage in to help us get into another season?