

ROOM TO GRIEVE
MATTHEW 14:13-21
LECTIONARY 18, YEAR A
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A WORD WE DIDN'T HAVE

In 1989, a grief researcher named Kenneth Doka gave us a **word** for something we felt but didn't have a name for.¹

That word is **disenfranchised grief**.

What is this?

It's the kind of grief that doesn't get flowers.

It doesn't get casseroles delivered to your door.

It's not listed in the company personnel policy as a benefit for taking time off work.

It's the grief over:

- A miscarriage no one else knew about.
- A friendship that just faded and you don't know why. Or one that ended suddenly.
- A pet who died.
- A job you gave twenty years to, gone in an afternoon.
- Or the job you never got.
- Selling a family home and moving.
- Retirement, when the work that gave you **purpose and routine** disappears.
- A diagnosis that changes what the future looks like.

¹"Disenfranchised Grief (Kenneth Doka) - Overview," The Loss Foundation, accessed July 2026, <https://thelossfoundation.org/stages-of-grief/disenfranchised-grief-kenneth-doka-overview/>.

- Not having the energy you once had.
- A future you had pictured that never materialized.

Doka found something important:

- This kind of grief can be hard because our society has a hard time naming **these** as real losses.
 - A “real loss” might be considered the death of a spouse or a parent, not the fading of a friendship.
- This kind of grief can be harder because we may not feel comfortable talking about these kinds of losses openly with other people.

For years, greeting card companies made cards for almost every grief and loss you could think of: sympathy cards for a death, cards for a pet that died, cards for a divorce.

But job loss wasn't one of them.

Then in 2011, Hallmark finally released a line of cards for people who had just been laid off, because customers kept calling and asking for them.²

Some of the cards were funny. One read, *“Don't think of it as losing your job, think of it as a time out between stupid bosses.”*

It took decades for the real grief that some people feel over a job loss to get recognized in its own greeting card.

...

Jesus was also no stranger to grief.

² "Job Loss Greeting Cards: Kind or Out of Place?," CBS News, September 27, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/job-loss-greeting-cards-kind-or-out-of-place/>.

It might surprise us to hear that, because we don't always picture Jesus grieving his own losses.

We might think of him as somehow immune to feelings like that. Like a spiritual guru floating above grief and pain and loss.

But that isn't true. Jesus felt grief the same way we do.

WHO DID JESUS LOSE?

In our Gospel lesson for today, we hear about a gruesome and violent incident that triggers Jesus's grief.

(v. 13) ... "Now when Jesus heard about the beheading of John the Baptist, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

John wasn't a stranger to Jesus. In fact, they were family.

- Their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were relatives.
- John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.
- John was the one who pointed at Jesus in front of everybody and said, *this is the one. This is the savior we've been waiting for.*

And now John was dead. Executed. Killed by a ruler who wanted him silenced.

Who did Jesus just lose? He lost a relative. He lost the person who baptized him. He lost someone who believed in him before the crowds ever did.

I don't believe this was a small loss for Jesus.

And what's the very first thing Jesus does after hearing the news about John's execution? He doesn't preach. He doesn't perform a miracle. **He gets in a boat and he leaves.**

He needs some room to grieve.

DOES ANYONE NOTICE?

Does anyone in this story ask Jesus how he's doing? It doesn't seem like it.

Jesus goes ashore and there's already a crowd waiting for him. Why? Jesus is the hottest ticket in town ... the crowds want the **healing**, they want the **teaching**.

Matthew tells us Jesus has compassion on them and he heals their sick.

Later that night the disciples walk up to him. And what do they say?

Jesus, *"This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."* (v. 15).

That's it. That's the conversation. Not, "Are you okay?" Not, "We heard about John, we're so sorry."

Just **logistics**. *"Hey Jesus, what are we doing about dinner?"*

I don't think the disciples were being unkind. Maybe they just didn't know about Jesus' grief.

When a person doesn't speak their grief out loud, it can be easy to miss it, even by people who love them.

Jesus's grief over the death of John never gets named by any other person in this whole passage.

Nobody sits with Jesus as he grieves. Nobody asks about it.

His grief just fades into the background of a very busy day, and the story moves on to the miracle of the loaves and fishes and the feeding of the 5,000.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

If even Jesus could grieve without anyone noticing, what does that tell us about grief in our own lives?

It tells me that carrying grief that others may not notice isn't unusual.

In fact, it's common.

- Maybe it's a loss that happened to you years ago that people stopped asking about.
- Maybe it's something you grieve that no one else but you consider to be a loss.

Maybe you're the one who has walked past somebody else's grief this week without knowing it was there, or because they never said the words out loud either.

What would it look like to simply **notice** someone else's grief?

Not to fix it.

Not to have the perfect words to make their grief go away.

Just to notice.

To ask someone how they're really doing, **and mean it.**

But what would it look like to notice and not minimize **your own, unique grief?**

To allow your own, unique grief to be real even when nobody else has recognized it yet.

To remember that just because someone else doesn't acknowledge it, doesn't mean you aren't feeling it.

ROOM TO GRIEVE

Room to grieve, especially disenfranchised grief, isn't usually something other people automatically provide you.

Sometimes you claim it yourself, the way Jesus did.

Sometimes you “get in that boat” before anyone even asks what is wrong.

And sometimes claiming **room to grieve** means naming that grief out loud to those who care about you.

CONCLUSION

The Bible doesn't tell us if Jesus's grief over the death of John was ever fully resolved.

His grief just sits there underneath the rest of the story, and it appears to go unnoticed by everyone around him.

But Jesus' grief for John is still real.

Whatever losses you're carrying this week ...

- whether recent or from years ago,
- whether it's recognized as a traditional type of loss, or whether it is a loss unique to you,
- whether anyone else has noticed it or not ...

Your grief is real.

And you deserve **room to grieve**.

Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSVue)

13 Now when Jesus heard about the beheading of John the Baptist, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.