Acquainted with Grief
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Lake Street Church
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In my deepest wound I saw your glory, and it dazzled me. —Augustine

Invitation to Worship: (Kahlil Gibran)
Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Ancient Witnesses: Isaiah 53:3, Matthew 26:36-40

When I was a kid, I remember church school teachers asking us for a Bible verse that we had memorized. One of us would say with a cheeky grin, “Jesus wept.” Sure we knew other verses, but this showed how clever we were. Smarty-pants. Ha, ha, ha. The class becomes hysterical. The teacher does not appreciate our humor.

This short sentence is found in the story of the death of Jesus’ friend, Lazarus. Martha and Mary, Lazarus’ sisters, and also close friends of Jesus, were overcome with grief and begged Jesus to do something about their brother’s death. And so, John’s account says, “Jesus wept.”

What we didn’t understand as children, and what many people never understand, is that these are two of the most profound words in the Bible. There is a definite reason why the later editors, who were responsible for the chapter and verse divisions, chose to let these two words be a verse by themselves. Jesus wept. Jesus, the Human One, who some would later call the Anointed One, the Christ—weeping. Many later associated the words of the prophet with Jesus, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Why is this profound?

The world does not honor grief. We cringe and hide from it. It is a sign of weakness and vulnerability—certainly not appropriate for someone of Jesus’ stature. Real men don’t cry. We need to be strong and in control. The world does not honor grief and sorrow; it’s embarrassing. Hide it away behind bedroom doors. Hide it even from wives, husbands, and children. It is unseemly, unbecoming. It’s too personal.
Yet, Jesus, the great spiritual master, wept. Openly and publicly. On several occasions. When Jesus was approaching the city limits of Jerusalem, he broke down and wept, saying, “The things that make for peace are hidden from your eyes.”
Robert Bly has a wonderful poem about the importance of weeping:

What is sorrow for? It is a storehouse
For wheat, barley, corn, and tears.
One steps to the door on the round stone.
And the storehouse feeds all the birds of sorrow.
And I say to myself: “Will you have sorrow at last?”
Go on, be cheerful in autumn,
Be stoic, yes, be tranquil, calm,
Or in the valley of sorrows, spread your wings.

Jesus knew how to spread his wings in the valley of sorrows. When we look to Jesus, it seems to me, we see a fully realized human being. In Jesus we find no pretense. We find no persistent denial, no false courage. He is not sweetly cheerful or thinking only positive thoughts. His is truly and fully human, the picture of health. He is whole, not perfect, but whole. Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, familiar with suffering.

Alfred North Whitehead said that “Youth is life untouched by tragedy.” One could live to be old, I suppose, but largely untouched by tragedy. And one could be very young chronologically, but very old. In Jesus, we see a life touched by tragedy. In Jesus, we see life fully developed and mature in his early thirties, when the average life expectancy wasn’t much more than that. In Jesus we see a peace, which is the understanding of tragedy.

We read this morning that at Gethsemane, Jesus took with him Peter and two others, and he shared with them: “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” He shared his deep feelings of sadness with the others.

At one point, it says that Jesus “threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...’” He poured out his heart. He did not act stoically; he did not act tranquilly. He spread his wings on the valley of sorrows.

There was also anger. When he found his disciples sleeping Jesus said, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” Dripping with sarcasm. This crankiness is grief speaking. Anger is a very human and natural reaction during grief.

Finally, Jesus is able to say, “yet not what I want but what you want, Father.” Jesus is able to take sorrow and grief, to integrate it and move forward. He accepted the cup; he accepted the reality of the situation which was his impending death.

There is a model for human wholeness, and part of that model is grieving. To become full means that we enter our sorrow, go into it all the way. When we don’t do this, this can cause real problems, and we eventually need to go back and grieve the losses of the past, even our childhood. I’m not saying that we are to wallow and revel in our pain and suffering. What I am saying is that sorrow is a storehouse. Our society and culture would have us believe that we can live without autumn and sorrow, or that we can minimize it. We can’t. There is a time to weep and a time to
laugh. There is a time to let ourselves go, to spread our wings in the valley of sorrows. For the cup of sorrow and the cup of life are the same.

Paul Tillich has described this very well:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.” (The Shaking of the Foundations, 1948, p. 162)

Often, by submitting to our grief do we find acceptance. By embracing our death do we find life. By spreading our wings in the valley of sorrows do we find that we are lifted by the winds of hope.

It is said that suffering is the great spiritual teacher. And what can suffering teach us? It can cause us to look deeply, very deeply into our situation. It can reveal the very core of reality.

Most of time, you see, we skim along the surface of life, like a water bug, preoccupied with things, our thoughts and desires, accumulating, achieving, accomplishing. And suffering, you see, can take all this away. It can strip everything away except life itself. All that’s left is to experience life at its most bare, fundamental level. Because even when those things we hold most dear are stripped away from us, we are still left with Life Itself. And it is possible to discover the preciousness, the sweetness, the sacredness, the absolute gift of Life Itself.

It was Meister Eckhart who said, “God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction. This is what sorrow is, what suffering is—subtraction. It is a painful stripping away. It is an experience of loss. I have no desire to romanticize or trivialize suffering; it is painful. But it can also be a process of uncovering the presence of God. Lao Tzu wrote, “To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day.”

And so this is what suffering can do, it can either open us up to experience Reality in its fullness, or it can close us off, becoming hardened, protected, even bitter and resentful.

This week we begin the season of Lent on the Christian calendar. And what I like is how on one day, Fat Tuesday, we have celebration, laughter and happiness, and then on the very next day, Ash Wednesday, is a somber day of loss, remembrance and grief. These two extremes—joy and sorrow—side by side—intertwined, intimately connected, not either/or but both/and—sorrow and joy.
This is why I love funeral services in New Orleans with its unique form of jazz music. It can be deeply mournful and then exuberant. *Both at once.*

I think everyone has experienced a moment of intense joy when we might laugh and weep at the same time. What an odd response. I think in those moments we experience the preciousness of life and anticipate the inevitable, painful loss—the tragic, fragile beauty of Reality. We experience both; *they are one.*

The more open, vulnerable and receptive we are to Life, the deeper we experience both joy and sorrow. However, as the spiritual teachers say, most of us most of the time do not live open, vulnerable and receptive lives. Instead we live protected and defended—closed off and narrow—like a drug-induced state—numb, not just to the pain but to the beauty and joy, as well. We live in this narrow range of experience, not too low, not too high.

As T. S. Eliot wrote, human beings “cannot bear too much reality.” *And so what we often think is happiness is just a pale and shallow imitation!*

And one can say that spirituality is about learning to experience Reality as it is, in its fullness—beyond our typical, habitual narrow range. To discover the truth of Reality requires a courageous openness and vulnerability to the present moment.

It is not surprising at all that Jesus, a fully evolved spiritual person, experienced grief and suffering. He transmuted this pain into an awareness of the Holy that is intimately present in Life Itself, life at its basic level. The harsh light of sorrow can break the fog in which we normally live.

And so we say that Jesus, the Human One, shows us what humanity is and is intended to be. But we also say that Jesus reveals to us the nature of God. And this Jesus points us to a God who suffers. The meaning of God’s suffering, however, has not been easy to understand.

Theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann says that the church has largely misunderstood the suffering and death of Jesus. She wrote:

> Christianity is a religion that glorifies one concrete execution—the execution of Jesus—because the Church sees in it an act of redemption through blood...The theology of the cross, not the word of Jesus, became the center of Christianity. The crucifixion became the event that made Jesus interesting. What was done to him, not what he said, is important to Christians. With its theology of human sacrifice, Christianity has replaced the word of Jesus with a hangman’s theology...

> In the effort to give Jesus’ death a meaning, one can only produce nonsense. This comes from trying to justify a murder that can’t be justified. Invoking God and God’s will can’t straighten out human crimes. Christians shouldn’t glorify a gallows. (*Putting Away Childish Things*, p. 270, 283-5)

I agree with Ranke-Heinemann that we should not glorify the gallows or the cross or the electric chair or and forms of violence and execution or the inhumanity of societies. The cross is not a
triumphant symbol; it is a tragic symbol. The mode of God’s redemption is not suffering; it is love. And God’s suffering is but a tragic side effect of this love. God does not require blood in order to love; God simply loves, and this love tragically causes God to bleed.

Let me put it this way: When we love and care for someone, we attend to them, pay attention to them, and receive their life into ours. They become a part of us. When they are happy, we rejoice. When they are in pain, we experience agony ourselves. We open ourselves up and make ourselves vulnerable so that their joy and suffering becomes our own. This is how we are to understand God’s suffering—as a result of God’s love, not its prerequisite.

And so, God bears with us everything we have to bear, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. As Whitehead put it, “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.” (Process and Reality, p. 351)

Traditional theology has been focused upon talking about how God is active. But it hasn’t been good at describing how God is also capable of being acted upon or affected by others. But it is God’s openness, God’s ability to be moved and affected by others, God’s sympathy, that the prophets spoke about. They were keenly aware of God’s pathos, God’s sense of feeling with people. According the Abraham Heschel, the God of the prophets is a God “who is involved and concerned rather than detached, absolute and unrelated.” This feeling, empathizing, suffering God is the God revealed by Jesus.

And so the writer of the second part of Isaiah was not writing about Jesus; he was writing about anyone who was a servant of God. The true servant of God—and Jesus was certainly that—may also be a king or a prophet or you or me. The true servant feels the despair of those refugees who have been driven from their homeland; she feels the hunger, the sorrow, the hopelessness of those who were deported to a hostile land. The true servant suffers because living in solidarity with the poor and marginalized is risky business. The true servant suffers for the same reason God suffers. Not in some masochistic way, not because suffering is good in itself. But because, like God, the servant loves life, is open to life, in all of its depth and complexity, and because the experience of sheer joy is worth the risk.

“Blessed are you who weep,” said Jesus, “for you will laugh.” As Gibran wrote, joy and sorrow are inseparable. “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” So, yes, blessed are you who weep, for then you will truly, truly laugh.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: (Kahlil Gibran)
Some of you say, “Joy is greater than sorrow,” and others say, “Nay, sorrow is greater.” But I say to you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.