

Counting Tears

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

November 3 2019-PM Service

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Psalm 56:3-4,8-9

Many of you know that Greg and I, when our kids were small, moved as a family for two years - to live and serve in Mozambique which is in East Africa. In preparation, we sold our home and in trying to raise a little income, held a big garage sale. On sale day, my neighbor agreed to keep an on eye on my kids and try to keep them at her house as much as possible because we planned to sell some of our kids toys and them being gone would make it a lot easier. All was going well, until my daughter Madde decided she missed mommy and headed home just as a woman was walking down the driveway with my daughter's Polly Pocket, which Madde apparently loved (despite a whole host of other toys and games we had) and I hated with a passion because all the little parts were constantly missing and I spent endless hours searching for Polly and her friends underneath my couch, in between cushions, or down dusty heat registers.

My daughter remembers it clearly to this day. She went running after the woman screaming, with tears streaming down her face, "Not my Polly Pocket!" The woman, knowing what was happening, just kept going. Got in her car and left. Yeah. It wasn't my finest parenting moment. Unfortunately, I remember it clearly too-because Madde seemed inconsolably devastated by this loss with over-the-top emotion. Now, years later, I think I understand it a bit more. Part of what Madde was feeling that day was certainly sadness and loss. She would miss this toy that she used to play with. It was part of her life and now it would be gone. But I'm pretty convinced, in retrospect, that there was so much more going on there. We were about to move not only from this house but out of the country and away from friends and cousins and grandparents. Her grief was about sadness, but it was also about a feeling of disorientation. Her grief was also about an attachment to something that made her feel grounded, that made her feel at home. That made her feel secure and safe in the midst of some chaos and change. I think about that event differently now because I know a little more about grief. Grief is a complex thing. When CS Lewis lost his wife Joy to cancer, he poured out his emotions and thoughts and sadness in a book called, "A Grief Observed." In the opening line of that book CS Lewis says, "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear."

Those who study grief have realized that grief is not just the pain of loss (though of course that is a significant part of it). Grief is also about becoming untethered. It's about losing an identity. Losing a map and compass all at once—losing a way to orient your life. That's where David is

in Psalm 56. It's believed that David wrote this Psalm in a time of disorienting chaos and grief. David had already been appointed king. Yet Saul wasn't thrilled with the idea of giving up his throne yet and was doing everything in his power to wipe David out of the picture. Eventually David realized he needed to run for his life, needed to leave Israel, a huge heartache for him-compounded by also having to leave behind his dearest friend Jonathan, whom he loved deeply.

In his despair, from his bed that very night, it's thought David wrote Psalm 56. These are words poured out from a heart filled with pain and the frightening feeling of being untethered. These words came rolling out in the dark of night because, as we know too, that seems to be the time for fear and loneliness to threaten to consume us. The psalms in general, as you know, don't hold back in their lamenting, in their crying out to God about just how hard and painful life is sometimes.

But this too, is common to the psalms, that though enemies and evil, sorrow and pain are named and acknowledged, nearly every psalm moves towards praise. David does it too. And in turning his face toward God's praiseworthy goodness, it isn't as if David's circumstances have changed. No. His trouble, his sorrows, are still the same. What changes for David is his orientation. What changes is that David calls himself to remember who God is. He reminds himself that God is not against him but always and forever for him. He tethers himself once again to God—or maybe more accurately, he recalls that no matter what God has tethered himself to David. He recalls that God sees him and knows him and holds him with an unshakable grip. For our text tonight I chose the verses that help David reorient himself to the God he loves so much. Because this is what we long to do as well.

I know that there are things that disorient you too. Things that make your life feel chaotic and not settled the way you would like them to be. I know that all of you have experienced loss on some level in your life and in some cases profound losses and grief. Tonight, we think in particular about the loss of people with whom we've shared life and love. Parents. Grandparents. Siblings. Friends. Spouses. Children. Infants. And there is true and overwhelming sadness that comes with these losses. A sadness so real your body aches and you want to get outside of your own skin. A sadness that, as the psalmist expresses in Psalm 6, makes you exhausted with your groaning and floods your bed with tears.

But here is what David says about the God to whom he is tethered, who sees and knows him and cares for him. He says: You, God, have kept count of my tossing; put my tears in your bottle.

In other words, so closely tethered are God's children to God, that God knows, God counts, the number of times you tossed and turned in your bed last night - first to your right, then to the left. God knows how many times you adjusted your pillow and glanced at the clock. Not only that—

somehow-in God's cosmic yet intimate care, God knows, God has kept count of every tear that has ever welled up and spilled onto your face-from birth to this very moment. His count is so accurate, says David, that it's as if every tear of yours has been captured and stored by God's own hand, in God's own bottle or container.

I've read that it actually was an ancient eastern practice for folks to collect and keep their own tears in a bottle or jar as evidence of their sorrows or pain. Then, at the end of life that bottle of tears would be buried with them as a representation of the pain and suffering they endured in life. There's a lot of historical evidence for this practice and in some cases there are multiple bottles of sorrow in a single grave.

Some biblical scholars suggest that in Luke 7, when the woman who was considered a sinner or an outcast of society, came to Jesus when he was dining at the home of Simon the Pharisees and wiped his feet with her tears—that she likely brought and used the tears she had collected from a lifetime of pain and sorrow. And, of course, that was exactly the right place to bring them. Into the presence of Jesus.

Tonight – that's what we do too. You'll be invited, in just a little while, to bring the names of your loved ones forward to be laid on our communion table.

I know that each one of the papers you bring forward represents tears-of which you can't possibly know the number. But God does.

And tonight-as you place those loved ones there, I hope you know that God has count of every anxious night, every toss or turn, every grief or burden, and every single tear—and in some mysterious, loving, sovereign way counts, holds, contains them.

But this table, appropriately, also reminds us of another container—a cup. A cup that Jesus shared with His disciples when He told them that this cup was the new covenant in His blood—which was poured out for our forgiveness, our righteousness, our wholeness. Our salvation. By his wounds we are healed. By his death we are washed clean and promised new life and new hope.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know for sure that even in the chaos of his upcoming suffering and death—that there is a hope beyond the sorrow to come. There is life beyond the grave. There is joy beyond the tears that will inevitably fall. I wonder if that is why when John, in recording his vision in the book of Revelation of the new Jerusalem, the Holy City coming down out of heaven at the end of time, made sure to mention that because the old order of things had passed away that there would be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. John indicates that God, the same God who had been so concerned with our tears all along, will be Himself the One who wipes away every tear from our eyes.

Friends until that day—may David’s words be ours as well: “God, when I am afraid, I will trust in you. You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in your bottle. This I know, that God is for me.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

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