

A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE
Meditation: Emotional Discipleship
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 7, 2021 – PM Service
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Psalm 42

In our tradition, discipleship tends to focus on the forming of our minds. For example, when we teach our children about what it means to follow Jesus, we've traditionally focused on doctrine and intellectual beliefs and moral rules. On Wednesday nights in the late 70's, my grade 7 classmates and I would sit in the basement of First Kingston Christian Reformed Church where a patient adult would teach us the Heidelberg Catechism. It was thorough instruction. We went Lord's Day by Lord's Day. At the end of the year we even had a graded test, just to make sure we actually learned the doctrines of election and total depravity. Which is great. I'm glad I learned that stuff. Doctrinal knowledge is indispensable. Doctrinal knowledge is necessary.

Necessary, but not sufficient. Recently, I was listening to a podcast where Tish Harrison Warren was interviewed. Tish Warren is an Anglican priest and author of the book *The Liturgy of the Hours*. That book won Christianity's book of the year award a few years ago. In her most recent book, *Songs in the Night*, she reflects on grief. She observes that we Christians don't just need an intellectual formation and intellectual discipleship; we need emotional discipleship. It's not just our minds that need forming, it's our hearts. And it's her observation that while we spend a lot of time doing intellectual formation in the church, we don't do much emotional formation, at least not consciously.

Tonight's service is an exercise in emotional formation. We are here to bring our grief to God. We are here to name it, to lift it up to him and have his Word and Spirit form us. Everyone here is dealing with grief. To be human is to deal with grief and loss of all kinds. Today we're here specifically to deal with the grief associated with death. We're here to deal with the grief that comes when someone we love, someone who loved us, is ripped out of our life. The grief that comes with death and loss is especially wrenching. It creates enormous emotional turbulence. I'm not sure there's anything else that we experience in life that does such strange and powerful things to our hearts. Grief produces such a wide range of emotions. The Psalmist says it's like waves washing over us.

How do we manage the emotional turbulence that comes with loss? In our society, people deal with loss in a whole range of ways. A lot of people try to deal with the emotional turbulence of loss by trying to dull it. We feel the pain of loss and we try to escape the pain. The waves of grief keep washing over our heart and we look for anything that will make those feelings stop. Tish Warren quoted a contemporary philosopher who observed that modern people have been trained to escape from strong emotions. They've been formed to deal with these feelings by fleeing reality. They buffer themselves against pain through technology, substances, entertainment and other distractions. Here's a quote: "We are tempted by nearly every current of culture to form our lives so there is no time for grief, but only the dim hum of consumption, dulling our agony, but with it, our joy, wonder, and longing. We know this kind of escapism isn't good for us, for many in our society it's easier than facing raw unfiltered emotion." It's the Gordon Lightfoot approach, "Sundown I think it's a shame that I get feeling better when I'm feeling no pain."

In the church, we've sometimes been discipled in a kind of stoicism. We've taught each other that when someone we love dies, the really good Christians, the really admirable ones are 'strong.' When someone reacts to their grief in a certain way we say, "wow, they are a rock, they're so strong!" I've said it. You've said it too. What do we mean when we say that? What kind of strength are we talking about? We mean that they don't show emotion. We mean that the deep pain doesn't seem to touch them. We call a person strong in the face of death when they hold their emotions in check.

Where did this definition of strength come from? I don't know, but I expect it's from a sense that we Christians should never be too sad. That we should always be cheerful. That sadness is a kind of spiritual weakness. That grief is a sign of lack of faith. The assumption seems to be: if we really were strong believers we would know that Christ is risen, and so when the people we love die, we should smile and sing songs of victory, because they are in heaven. While it is certainly true that Christ has died and risen and won the victory over our losses, does that mean we should be stoic in the face of loss? Is that the teaching of the Bible? Honestly, stoicism is more Greek than biblical. The Bible gives us resources for emotional discipleship and the Bible does not disciple us in this cheerful stoicism.

There's one book in particular that God has given us for our emotional discipleship. That's the book of Psalms. For more than two thousand years God's people have used that book to express their emotions in times of crisis. When we pray the Psalms we express our emotions to God and we open our hearts to His shaping power. John Calvin - maybe not a person who would first come to mind when you think of emotional discipleship - calls the Psalms the anatomy of all parts of the soul. He said that "there is no human emotion that anyone finds in himself whose image is not reflected in this mirror. All the griefs, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hopes, fears, anxieties, in short all the disquieting emotions with which the minds of men are want to be agitated, the holy Spirit hath here pictured exactly."

And when we go to the Psalms, how did they shape our emotions? Do the Psalms teach us stoicism? Do the Psalms teach us emotional reserve? Hardly. The Psalms are the furthest thing from emotionally flat. Psalm 42: my soul pants for you. Tears have been my food day and night. My bones suffer mortal agony. My soul is downcast and disturbed within me. All your waves and breakers have swept over me. And that's just one psalm. Psalm 88 - darkness is my only friend. Psalm 6 - have mercy on me oh Lord for I am faint, my bones are in deep agony. Psalm 22 - my heart has turned to wax. It has melted within me. Psalm 30 - you have turned my wailing into dancing. My heart will sing your praises and not be silent! Psalm 27 - my heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him!

Nothing flat about any of this. And maybe that's because the author of many Psalms is a person who is far from stoic. David was no stoic. He could write poems of lament that express the bottom of his grief. And he could dance with joy before the ark as it returned to Jerusalem. He raged, he loved, he wept.

Jesus was no stoic either. If our model for emotional health is Jesus - and who else would it be - our model is not stoicism. Jesus was convulsed by grief at the death of Lazarus. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem as he considered the fate of the people there. Jesus expressed anger and indignation. Jesus expressed joy. And at Gethsemane his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. When it comes to emotional discipleship, the Psalms, David, and Jesus all point us away from stoicism and towards full expression of all our feelings before him.

Of course, in Jesus, we don't just get a model of emotional expression, out there in the moral distance. We get a friend who shares our emotional life, who goes with us into the emotional turbulence. Jesus understands sorrow, he understands loss, he understands perplexity, and he understands anger, so when we fling our feelings at him, he understands. When we are sorrowful to the point of death, we have a Lord who has been sorrowful to the point of death, so we can trust him.

The author Dane Ortlund showed me something that I never noticed before. There's only one place in Scripture where we hear about what's in Jesus heart. Of course we see lots of things that give us strong clues to what's in his heart, but there's only one place where Jesus specifically tells us what's in his heart. That's Matthew 11:29. There Jesus tells us, *"come unto me all you who are weary and are heavy laden, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart. Jesus knows all the weight of your loss, he knows you are weary and heavy-laden, and so he wants you to come to him. When you come to him, he will take some of that burden upon himself. When you come to him, he will show you his crucified hands, and he will say, gently: *"I am the resurrection and the life. See, I was dead too. But I am alive."*

Tonight we will give him our grief and anger, and he will tell us again, because he knows we need to hear it again, *"do not be afraid. I am with you."*

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