

Rejoicing and Mourning
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
August 14, 2022-AM Service
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Romans 12:15

In verses we've studied together this summer, Paul has painted a word-portrait of the redeemed life that is available to the people of God. It's included all kinds of habits and dispositions and motivations that Jesus came to cultivate in us by the Spirit. The corner of that portrait we're looking at today is verse 15. Rejoice with the rejoicing; and weep with the weeping. Only six words from Paul's pen. On the face of it, that sounds straightforward enough. We can get our heads around celebrating with others when their hearts are overflowing with joy. We can agree that sensitivity is important when someone's hurting.

But actually living this out asks us to zoom in on some of the unpredictable edges of human experience and expression. It asks us to manage our own feelings as we encounter the feelings of others. Maybe for some of us it's even hard to acknowledge that we *have* strong emotions sometimes. We try to manage them so carefully. The culture and faith tradition that birthed this church tends to be excellent at trusting God and doing the best we can when things are hard. We're also good at thanking God when things go well. We live into a strong doctrine of providence. But Paul's command invites us into something else. It hints at the possibility of wholehearted, full-bodied redeemed expression and reception of our emotional lives within the family of faith. We'll talk about rejoicing a little this morning too, but I'm going to start with mourning.

Have you ever realized that "weeping with those who weep" assumes that sometimes *we* will be the ones weeping? We don't always get to be the strong ones. So I have a question: How willing are you to share your tears with others in church? Before you answer that, let's go one step further and explore the kind of tears Paul is talking about. The word he uses for 'mourn' is *klaio*, and it means, literally, 'to cry out or to wail.' It describes the loud crying of mourners in the gospels when they wept over a death. It's used when Peter weeps after he denies Jesus. And it's used for Paul's sadness in Philippians over those who are enemies of the cross of Jesus. A parallel word in the Old Testament is *bakah*—which means 'weeping for of joy or sorrow.' Lament, complaint, remorse or repentance are all included. You can almost hear the sound of crying when you say the word.

So just to be clear, God's people aren't required to sniffle softly when things are upside-down. In modern terms, sometimes we ugly cry. But mostly we ugly cry alone in our culture. I can count on one hand the number of times I have witnessed the ugly cry in church. And I can count on no hands at all the number of times I'd volunteer to be the person doing it. Why is that? Why, if we go to the gym, do we expect to see the stuff and guts of sweaty people working out; but if we come to church, the gymnasium of our faith, we try hard to look like everything's under control?

Family of God, this congregation knows grief—grief in living, and grief following a death. More than a few of you think long and hard about when and how to return to this sanctuary major loss. You know layers of complicated feelings will unfold when you enter this space and this community. It's a place where you drew near to God with someone you deeply loved. The empty pew cries out. There's a cramp in your heart, tears behind your eyes, and wariness about the responses of the people around you. Why does our pain isolate us? Given that

grief of many kinds is so common among us, what makes sharing it feel so dangerous? Our wariness isn't without a reason. It's true that sharing our pain can go wrong in a variety of ways. Here are just three possible dangers.

First, we know that if we share our pain, it's possible we'll be misunderstood. Untangling and explaining our grief takes time and energy. We know others might not understand it. So maybe we don't want to risk sharing it. In the first chapter of 1 Samuel, Hannah goes to the tabernacle to pray. And as she pleads with God for a baby boy, bitter tears punctuate her prayer. Yet when Eli the priest sees Hannah praying and crying, what does he think? He assumes that she's drunk. He tells her to put away her wine. So Hannah has to explain herself: "¹⁶Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." Now Eli understands something of her grief and can bless Hannah on her way. But Hannah's story speaks to the risk of public grief. You may be mischaracterized or misunderstood. And that can add to your pain.

Second, if we share our pain, we might be mocked. In Psalm 35, David writes about his adversaries, "When *they* were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting...¹⁴I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother.¹⁵ But when *I* stumbled, they gathered in glee... They slandered me without ceasing." Some of you have had your pain dismissed or even mocked. That too is salt in wounds, insult added to injury. So rather than sharing pain, you've learned to armor up. You've determined to keep your wounds out of sight.

Third, if we share our pain, other people might try to explain it for us. Here we might think of Job and his friends. Initially Job's friends respond to his calamity so well. They sit on the ground with him for an entire week, silent before his immense trouble, waiting for him to speak first. But then in speech after speech they try to understand it, to identify *what in Job went wrong* to explain the suffering in his life. Perhaps sometimes we don't want to share our pain because we don't feel strong enough to weather others' explanations for it. Maybe it's precisely because it's dangerous to share that Paul tells us to respond to one another's grief with tenderness, with tears of our own. He says, quite simply, "Weep with those who weep." Coming alongside someone in pain doesn't require us to understand it or find out who is to blame for it, especially at first. And we certainly shouldn't ridicule it. Sometimes the hurting person's tears speak of things even they don't understand. At first, all we need to do is hold a bucket and capture the ocean of tears. In doing that, we reflect the care of God. Psalm 56:8 has a beautiful picture of God's concern. Depending on the translation, it's either that he lists our tears in his scroll or captures them in his bottle. The Message paraphrase says it this way: "You've kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights. Each tear entered in your ledger, each ache written in your book."

God sees us and hears us. His way with us can be mysterious and sometimes terribly hard. In those times we cling to the promises that we're not outside his grasp, and that he's got us on a path for our good in the end. Not only does God *see* our pain; Jesus the perfect Son *knows it* firsthand. "He took up our pain and bore our suffering," Isaiah 53 says. Jesus, too, wept at the death of a friend. And the God who sees us and the God who knows us is also the God who saves us. In Jesus, the Triune God has a plan to go with us, to redeem us, to make us perfectly whole.

In his book *Feeling Like God*, pastor and professor David Crump writes: "Christ is more than a sympathetic friend who has walked this road before; he is also the indwelling God who now walks my road with me...Consequently, I am no longer alone...Christ now sees all that I see exactly as I can see it." Jesus' fully divine, fully human life unites our complex inner lives to his own. His life, lived out in us, heals us on the inside. In Christ, we will eventually become

perfectly ourselves. This kind of being known by Jesus opens the possibility for people in pain to begin loosening our grip on holding everything all together: We know we are known fully by a perfect God, and perfectly beloved even in our weakness.

A long time ago I attended a retreat here in Grand Rapids. We had some time alone for prayer in a large room with other participants. And as I shut my eyes and tried to settle my heart for reflection, I heard a voice. At first I thought it was softly spoken prayers. But the sounds continued and grew louder. Someone was crying. Soon the whole room echoed with grief over a much-loved mother who was dying. I opened my eyes and looked around. Where was the crying coming from? And then I saw her—a pillar of the congregation, curled up on her knees before God. It was a deeply personal moment. I didn't know what to do. But as I watched, friends circled around. The crying didn't stop. But the friends witnessed the tears, honored the weight of the loss, and helped carry the grief for that time and space.

That church member's strength was in her vulnerability. She gave all of us a window into the sharper contours of loss. Somehow she was at home enough in the care of God and among her church family to ride the waves of deep grief with others. I realized I needed to pay attention—not to my quiet prayer in my seat, but to recognize the value of the Spirit's work in someone else's life. For me this became a picture of grief, together. It was hard. And holy.

Crump goes on to describe the emotional freedom granted to us as Christians. In Christ, he says, “[we have been] given the prospects of complete emotional...well-being. Set free from the crippling effects of our separation from the Creator, our emotions are liberated to become what God always intended them to be: finite echoes of the infinite, eternal heart. *Now* we may possibly experience self-giving love free of...smothering possessiveness; appropriate jealousy with no hint of selfish envy; necessary sadness that never bleeds into despair...righteous anger purified of all bitterness and revenge as we patiently await God's solution; and joy that elevates the senses, both physical and spiritual, whether derived from the tiniest...coincidence or the long-awaited fulfillment of a dream.”

The wholeness that comes to us definitively but gradually through Christ's indwelling presence makes way for the redemption of all of our emotions—including the one at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. It's the one named in the first half of Romans 12:15: joy. “Rejoice with those who rejoice.” Paul says here. And in his letter to the Philippian church, written from a Roman prison, he says “Rejoice in Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” If we take Paul's imprisonment seriously, it can't be that we rejoice because everything is so great all the time. We rejoice in spite of what's wrong. We experience joy as we delight in Jesus himself. Christian joy is not happiness for the gifts of the here and now; instead, joy points ahead to our good future with God. The certainty of that good future gives us real joy for here and now.

Joy, CS Lewis says, is heaven's most important business. In *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis says that in this world where our tears are abundant, “certain qualities that must belong to the celestial condition have no chance to get through. They can project no image of themselves, except in activities which, for us, here and now, are frivolous”—playful, inconsequential. “Dance and games are frivolous unimportant down here; for ‘down here’ is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. [Those things which], if [they] could be prolonged here would be [irresponsible], [are most like] that which in a better country is the end of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”

Rejoice with those who rejoice. In this place where mourning is both palpable and common, those redeemed by Jesus can rejoice together too. So although there are tears, take

some time for play! Put your feet in the lake; perfect your golf swing; watch the eagle diving for a fish. Post the pictures on Instagram and delight in the gifts of this life with other people. Go to the weddings and cry for joy. Listen to music together. Dance and be a little silly. Celebrate baptisms. And for goodness' sake, eat the birthday cake. Claim and share both your daily and profound glimpses of joy with others. They are signposts for all of us--showing us the way to our country of our citizenship, where all is joy in the presence of Christ.

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