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Luke 13:31-35

A TIME FOR TEARS

What makes you laugh? Not everyone finds the same things humorous. Some people love slap stick comedy. Others love puns or jokes. Some people find humor in the exposure of life's ironies. What makes us laugh can be unique to us, but we know the value in laughter. Laughter is good for us. It heals what is wounded, it unites us together, it focuses a lens upon issues in our society. Perhaps what is less appreciated is the value of tears, of crying, of laments of sorrow. What makes us cry may indeed reveal more about us than what makes us laugh. Our tears reveal what we care about, what we value, what we cherish. Our tears express pain, frustration, despair, and the recognition that things are not as they should be. And thus, our tears are also good for us because they help us express the truth about ourselves, our loved ones, our world.

And yet, most of us are uncomfortable around expressions of sorrow or pain. Tears embarrass us, other people's as well as our own. We try to hide our own sorrows or tears from other people, saving those rare moments when we cry for the privacy of our bedrooms. We don't let too many people see such sorrow or pain.

But Jesus doesn't seem to hide his sorrow or his tears. He weeps right out in the open for all to see. When we catch up with Jesus today, he and his disciples have begun to head to Jerusalem where Jesus anticipates he will face his own death. He is not *yet* in Jerusalem, only heading that way. But in anticipation of his arrival in that city, Jesus breaks forth into a lament. A lament is a cry of sorrow, of pain, of frustration. Whether or not real tears fall from your eyes, a lament is a cry from the heart. It's your heart crying.

We might expect that Jesus, knowing what awaits him in Jerusalem, might be offering a lament for his own life. That would be totally understandable--to cry out in pain or fear for his life and for the brutality that awaits him. But notice who Jesus cries over. He cries, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Jesus cries for Jerusalem! He cries for the people of the very city that will inflict mortal injury upon him. Of course, Jesus' lament for Jerusalem wasn't just about the actual city of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem is symbolic of all humanity, of all people. We are that city of Jerusalem--God's holy people who are often misguided, unwise, foolish, and selfish. Jesus' lament is for us. And he speaks tenderly about wanting to protect us from harm like a mother hen tries to protect her chicks, to guide us and shield us from the dangers we bring to one another and ourselves,. And yet, we are not willing. We scurry out from beneath her wings, oblivious to the dangers that exist beyond the love of Jesus' wings. Whether or not actual tears flowed from Jesus' eyes, here in our passage today, Jesus offers a cry from the heart about the people he was sent to love and to save.

This is how Jesus feels about Jerusalem before he even gets there. But in a few chapters later, the gospel writer Luke resumes this same theme when he describes Jesus' reaction upon actually arriving at Jerusalem. We are told that when Jesus drew near the city and saw it, "he wept over it, saying 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'" Jesus not only laments the sorrow of his heart with words but actually weeps openly for the people he loves and wants to save.

And his tears teach us something. His tears taught his first disciples and us modern disciples sitting here today about what matters to God. *We* matter to God. God isn't out to get

us, to zap us when we are wrong. God loves us so much that God is filled with sorrow over us. God weeps for us, as any loving parent might for her or his beloved children. Jesus' tears help us to learn about a God who wants to help us, to guide us, and who grieves when we reject that way and that love.

That is the value of the lament. Seeing the tears of others, hearing their cries of sorrow or pain or frustration, teaches us, guides us, shapes us, changes us. William Willimon is a pastor and former bishop in the United Methodist Church. Willimon, who is white, grew up in the South at a time when racial segregation was still embedded in society. He recalls a time in his youth when the Rev. Billy Graham Crusade was scheduled to come to his town. Everyone was terribly excited and eager for the big revival event. But then they learned that Billy Graham insisted on the integration of the races at his revival event. Instead of sitting separately, whites and blacks would sit together in the auditorium. Willimon was the youth representative to his congregation's governing board so he was there the night the board members debated this disturbing news and ultimately decided that they could not support the Billy Graham Crusade because it violated their beliefs that whites and blacks should be segregated. Willimon remembers leaving the church building after the meeting was over and heading down the stairs when he heard the sound of weeping. He edged closer to the sound where he discovered the church's pastor weeping in his study. Willimon states that he will always be grateful for that moment where he could witness what makes pastors cry. I can't help but wonder, however, what those board members might have learned had the pastor expressed those tears in public rather than in private. Seeing other peoples tears, hearing their cries of pain, shapes us, changes us.

What makes the lament so powerful is its utter honesty. Laments of sorrow are honest expressions of what we feel, of what is wrong, of what is painful. And so often we tend to live in

denial of what pains us, to ignore what isn't right about ourselves or our world, to pretend things are ok when they are not, to gloss over the pain.

Some years ago, a colleague of mine who served as a pastor in another church became very ill with a life-threatening illness. He fought bravely against the disease but in the end, he died. He was only in his 50's and so his death struck so many of us as especially tragic. It was with a heavy heart that I attended his funeral. But the service shocked me. There was no mention of our grief or of our sorrow. There was no acknowledgement of the tragedy or anger we might feel about his life cut short. Instead, the service was filled with joyful talk about his having "gone home to God," a kind of triumphalism that God had won over death, of praise-filled songs celebrating God's victory. And while these affirmations of faith were indeed true, the tenor of the service also didn't feel honest--true but not honest. There was no space made in that service for the lament of pain, the cry of sorrow, the expression of anguish, the declaration that something wrong had taken place.

Author Michael Card writes in his book, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament*, that in the cases of tragic deaths and sorrows, a lot of Christians "are embarrassed, almost panicky, that there are situations to which they have no answer." He adds, "We want to present Jesus as the answer man, and we don't want Jesus to look bad. And if that's your theology, Jesus can look very bad at funerals."

In contrast, Card remembers a funeral for a six-year old girl killed by a drunk driver. Although many people did not know her well, there was a huge turn-out at the church for the funeral. Card remembers, "It was so tragic no one even tried to fix it. The best answer we had was to show up. That's a big part of lamenting as a church together--basically showing up."

The lament is an honest response of faith to a world that is broken and fallen. Genuine worship offers to God our pain, our struggle, our despair, and our deep anguish over all that is wrong and unjust. In our lament, we hand all that over to God with a plea for healing and for help. Later, in our prayer today, we will take time to offer our laments. We will not merely offer prayers of concern for those in trouble or distress, but rather, we will make our prayers into laments of sorrow and pain. We will have the opportunity to cry to God our questions rooted in pain: when . . . why . . . how long . . . where? We will cry for our personal brokenness and pain. We will cry for our loved ones who are suffering or struggling. We will cry for the sufferings of strangers, for people who got lost along life's road. We will cry for our planet and all the situations that are not how they should be. You will be given the opportunity to voice your laments aloud or from within your hearts. We all have them. Today is a day for tears.

Lent is the time for tears, the time for the lament. It is the season when we acknowledge that things are not as they should be, we are not as we should be. Brokenness, pain, struggle, injustice, sin, and sorrow make up our lives and our world. And we cry to God for help, not just for ourselves or our loved ones but for the whole world. The Apostle Paul wrote that all creation groans in anticipation of God's redemption and healing. Lent is the time for our groans, our laments, our tears as we seek God's redemption.

But our cries of pain do not go nowhere. Michael Card writes that the lament "is the people of God planting seeds of hope in the soil of exasperation and despair, expecting that the Lord will come through in the end." So let us plant seeds of hope today and this season. May our cries of pain and frustration and sorrow be our expressions of hope that the journey to Easter is not in vain. For we matter to God. We matter so much that God weeps for us.