

Psalm 22 / Psalm 80  
Tears Are Worship Too / From Plea to Praise  
January 15, 2012      Maple Grove UMC

When my girls were little, Laurie Clark (who was one of your pastors then) gave them a CD called *Free to Be You and Me*. It's really a piece of feminist propaganda, not that my daughters needed any. They loved that CD, played it over and over. One of the songs goes like this:

It's all right to cry; crying gets the sad out of you.  
It's all right to cry—it might make you feel better.

Now I mock that song and make fun of it in various ways. But I also know it's true. And despite the fact that I don't really like to cry, I am a sentimental old fool, crying at movies and over sad songs. It *is* all right to cry. In fact, sometimes it's necessary and faithful to cry.

Years ago Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote a famous article called "The Costly Loss of Lament."<sup>i</sup> Brueggemann noted that the psalms of lament—the sad, angry, complaining ones—have all but disappeared from worship. Anger is now considered inappropriate for worship. Much contemporary worship seems to need to be upbeat and cheerful all the time. Some people complain if worship is too somber even in Lent. Our *United Methodist Hymnal* includes as responsive readings

only 101 of the 150 psalms. By far the greatest number of those left out are laments.<sup>ii</sup> Not only do we tend not to use the sad, angry, complaining psalms; they're not even in the book.

Brueggemann argues that this loss of lament has two consequences for our relationship with God:

1. For one, if we are only allowed to say cheerful things to God, it ceases to be a real and genuine relationship. If you can't ever be sad, angry or complaining to God, then part of the time you're either faking it or not saying anything to God at all.
2. And second, lament states that the way things are is unacceptable and that we need and expect God to do something about it. Not to lament is to give up on God changing things.

Brueggemann is an eloquent scholar. I'm just a country preacher, so here's how I put it: it's all right to cry. *Tears are worship too.* Of 150 psalms in the Bible, 45 (almost a third) are psalms of lament. Besides that there are large sections of Jeremiah, called the weeping prophet, and the whole book of Lamentations. Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus, and lamented over the holy city: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often have I

desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!" (Matthew 23:37-38) Tears are worship in the Bible too.

Here's why I bring this up: Maple Grove has been going through some sad, sad times. There is, of course, Rev. Croy's ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, and how helpless we feel as we watch him bravely struggle. But that's not all, not nearly all. The well-loved Pastor Laurie Clark left in '97 after ten transformative years and then the well-loved Jeff Allen left three years later and wasn't replaced. The husband of our children's minister at the time, Todd Buchy, died tragically last year. And then out of the blue came Rev. Trout's cancer. And I'm telling you, Lord, it's enough now. My God, my God, how long will this go on?

A while back our church staff had lunch with some of the grief counselors at Kobacher House, a hospice facility. We had a very helpful conversation about the ways grief can affect not just individuals but whole communities, whole churches of people. Here are some things they thought people at Maple Grove may be feeling:

- A lot of people, they said, may just be kind of depressed. Not necessarily in our personal or family lives, but when we get together

at church, it reminds us of all we've been through. Dealing with all this sadness and loss as a church isn't *like* grief; it *is* grief.

- Some people—consciously or not—may be nervous, kind of waiting for the next shoe to drop. Who's going to leave us next? Who else is going to get sick?
- Some people, they suggested, whether they want to admit it or not, are probably angry, probably with God. Who else is there to blame? And anger, even when justified, takes its toll on the soul.
- Some of you may be feeling a little self-protective, like you don't want to get too involved in stuff. It's just too hard, or it hurts too much.
- And some of you probably aren't feeling any of these things at all and are thinking to yourselves, "What's all the fuss about? Let's just get on with things."

Who knew all that could be going on in one church all at the same time?

Now, I don't mean for this to be a manipulative moment. I'm not trying to *make* you feel sad. If you don't, you don't, and thanks be to God. But collectively, as a congregation, we do have reason to be sad, or angry, or complaining. And if so, all that can be expressed to God. Tears are worship too.

And here's one way we'll do that. We're going to light some candles this morning—which may be as close to lament as we Methodists let ourselves get. Come and light a candle for Bill. Light a candle for Todd and Brenda Buchy. Light a candle for Dave Trout, or Laurie Clark, or Jeff Allen. Light a candle for yourself and whatever grief is hanging over your life. It's all right to cry. Tears are worship too.

I want you to know that lighting these candles is not the end of our worship, not quite. Tears are worship too, but tears are not all of worship. The psalms of lament nearly always move from plea to praise, from resentment to relinquishment, and we will do so as well. Just so you know where we're going. But first, light a candle. Cry your tears, if it's right for you. For tears are worship too.

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So having lamented, how do you move from plea to praise? Where is the road that leads from resentment to relinquishment? Psalm 5 begins like this: "Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing. Listen to the sound of my cry . . ." but it ends like this: "But let all who take refuge in you rejoice, O Lord; let them ever sing for joy." Again Psalm 13 begins, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" and ends, "I

will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” How do the psalms do that? Where does this praise come from? How do the psalms move from lament to praise?

Well, let me give several quick answers, in case one might work for you. First of all, psalms move from lament to praise by sheer force of habit. Praise is how the song ends. It’s what we always sing, or almost always. We don’t stop praying without saying, “Thank you, Lord,” and we don’t leave church without praising God. You could say it’s just going through the motions, but it’s such a faithful and helpful motion to go through. One thing that moves us from tears to praise is sheer force of habit—it’s what we Christians do. Thank goodness.

Hurt that is expressed and submitted to God can just possibly be relinquished to God.<sup>iii</sup> As they used to say, you “leave it at the altar.” I don’t just mean that it’s cathartic to cry; I don’t just mean that crying “gets the sad out of you,” though there is something to that. I mean that when grief or anger or bitterness is given to God, it is transformed by God. Sometimes the actual situation is changed; sometimes, as with grief, there is little that can be done to change the situation. But whenever we lift lament to God, we are changed, and God is changed. True relationship is restored, deepened; the hurt is shared. And praise

can come to our lips again not in spite of our lament, but because of our lament.

In truth, lament *is* a form of praise. For why would we share our tears with God unless we believe God comforts and cares? Why would we express our anger at God if not to move God to action? And why would we bother complaining to God unless we know our complaint matters to God? Lament sets our tears before the throne of God, who we has delivered before and who we have faith will deliver again.

This may not be an exuberant, cheerful, jump-up-and-down kind of praise--more a determined, realistic, necessary kind of praise. It's the kind of praise that gets individuals through times of trouble and catastrophe, the kind of praise that gets congregations through diseases and cancers and what we hate even worse—change. It's all right to cry—the light of Christ is still shining. Tears are worship too.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, in *"The Psalms and the Life of Faith,"* ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 98-111.

<sup>ii</sup> See John C. Endres and Elizabeth Liebert, *A Retreat with the Psalms: Resources for Personal And Communal Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>iii</sup> See Brueggemann, 100.