

SOWING SEEDS OF JOY IN TIMES OF TEARS

Psalm 126:5-6 (Scripture readings start on pg. 3)

When I was at the seminary we used to wonder what it would be like to conduct our first funeral. How we would deal with the families and friends of the person who died? What could we do to comfort them? People who have just lost a loved one grieve their loss deeply and we knew that they would look to us for consolation. But when the time came, what would we say? How would we speak to their grief?

Grief is hard for us to handle. And it doesn't come only when someone dies: we grieve over other things that happen to us in our lives—things that seem like “mini-deaths.” Our marriage dissolves. One of our children turns on us or becomes self-destructive. We get fired. We are stricken with a severe, maybe disabling sickness. Depression descends on us and we can't shake it. When things like this invade our lives, it can seem like part of us dies. And we grieve. Grief is an inevitable part of our life in this fallen world—a world the Bible calls “a vale of tears.” Sooner or later grief comes to all of us.

Our Lord Himself experienced grief during his pilgrimage through this world on his way to the cross. In his marvelous book, *Inside Out*, Dr. Larry Crabb wrote the following: “*No matter how genuine and how deep our faith we cannot avoid the impact of living in a fallen world. Neither could our Lord. He was in perfect communion with the Father, yet he was a “man of sorrows”—moved to the point of anguish by the hardness of human hearts.*”

We can feel the power of grief when it comes to someone close to us—someone who has experienced a great loss. We mutter platitudes like, “Time heals all wounds,” or “This too will pass”—realizing even as we say the words that they mean little to those who are grieving and that we speak them mostly as a way of getting through an awkward moment.

But when it's our own grief, we feel its power firsthand. Then what do we do? Like a skunk that shows up at the garden party, we wish it wasn't there but it is so what do we do about it?

Well, usually we indulge it for awhile and then try to put it out of our mind by focusing on something else—something like our job or our a hobby or a sport. The golfer starts spending more time on the links, the drinker ups his intake of booze, the ambitious man spends more time at work—whatever takes our mind off our grief. And this can be pretty effective: it diverts our attention from our loss and focuses it on something that we can do something about and that helps us forget about our grief. We put the past behind us and get on with things. We tell ourselves: “Don't wallow in misery—just get on with your life. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It's a sensible way to handle grief and it works pretty well.

But how utterly different it is from the way described by the Psalmist, who urges us to sow seeds of joy in times of grief! “*Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy; he who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy—carrying sheaves with him!*” (Psalm 126:6)

WOW! Isn't it amazing how the Bible utterly confounds conventional wisdom? The Wisdom of the Scriptures simply will not conform to the wisdom of Dear Abby—or Benjamin Franklin. But is the Psalmist really saying that there is a potential fertility in grief? That it can be rich soil for growing the mustard seed of faith? The author of *Hebrews* seems to be taking up the same theme when he urges us: *“Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons...no discipline is pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”* (Heb. 12:7, 11) Just as natural fathers discipline their children because they love them and want them to grow up to be responsible adults, our heavenly Father uses hardship to discipline His children because He loves them and wants them to “grow up” in their faith. Hardship comes to all people, but the idea here is that God's children—His sons and daughters who have been baptized into His family as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ—can actually profit from hardship—if they allow themselves to be trained by it.

The author of *Hebrews* and the Psalmist are saying that there is a choice which falls to every child of God: we can resent the hardship which comes our way and let it embitter us or we can accept it and seek to learn from it. We can treat the grief which comes our way as intrusive and try to put it out of our mind by seeking diversions, or we can regard it as fertile soil and explore it, seeking God in the midst of our grieving. We can learn from our experience or we can merely endure it. We can be enriched by hardship or hardened by it. Assuming that your preference is for the former of these alternatives, the question is: How do we learn? How do we sow seeds of joy in times of tears?

To answer these questions, let's turn to St. Paul's words in today's Epistle lesson: *“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.”* (2 Cor. 4:8-11) Now these words are difficult to understand, but the gist of what Paul is saying is this: There are two contrary forces at work in every Christian: the force of life and the force of death. The life-force, which is the power of the Holy Spirit, is at work in us nourishing the tiny mustard seed of faith, helping it grow into a large, fruit-bearing tree of life so that we might become living testimonies to the Kingdom of God. At the same time, the death-force is at work in us in the form of our sinful flesh or old man—that foul cretin who rages against everything in us that is of God. The result is that Christians always have a civil war raging inside, the flesh and the spirit wrestling with each other like Jacob and Esau in Rebecca's womb—each one struggling to overcome the other and become the rightful heir.

It isn't easy. The struggle within us tears us apart and it's made all the more difficult by the fact that ***we don't always know which side to root for.*** We're tempted to yield to the death-force because since our will is corrupt we are powerfully drawn to its temptations. Satan appears as an angel of light, saying, *“You're not gonna die! You can be like God—knowing good and evil! Gather ye rosebuds while ye may: old time is a-flying! You only go around once, so grab all the gusto you can!”* Tempting propositions. That's why the *Proverb* says: *“There is a way which seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death.”* (Prov. 14:12) The fact is, we are hopelessly unequipped for the task; we need the Holy Spirit to take the lead—convicting us and counseling us through the word of God, showing us our sin, showing us our Savior and above all, nourishing the tiny

mustard seed of faith and helping it grow. The Holy Spirit—as we pray to Him, search for Him, welcome Him and respond to Him—helps us in two ways. First, He acts as a finely tuned laser, focusing God's cleansing power on the sin, the pride and the rebelliousness that springs up in us and purging it like a smelter burns away the dross in ore so that the pure gold can be revealed—the gold in this case being the beauty and purity of Christ Who dwells within us. This process is what the author of *Hebrews* had in mind when he wrote: *“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow: it judges the thoughts and attitude of the heart.”* (Heb. 4:12) Paul calls it, *“His incomparably great power at work in us who believe.”* (Eph. 1:18) The second thing the Holy Spirit does is to comfort us with the assurance that God is walking with us every step of the way in the midst of our grief and that God will—in His own time and way—bring forth joy out of our weeping.

The process is painful. We'd much rather forget about it and lose ourselves in superficial activity—do this, do that, do the other thing—so that we can regain the sense that we are managing our spiritual lives just like we manage our secular lives. We'd rather forget about our pain than accept it. We'd rather see it as an obnoxious invader rather than an opportunity to grow in faith. After all, if you see a scalpel coming toward you, you are not inclined to embrace it.

Yet that is exactly what God suggests we do when we encounter pain and grief in our lives. Rather than regard it like a skunk at the garden party, a repulsive and inconvenient intruder, strive to see it as a fertile pasture for seeking God in the midst of it—in prayer, in His Word, and in worship. Our sinful flesh, where we spend most of our time, finds the notion abhorrent. But the Holy Spirit of God rejoices in such seeking and has promised to show us the way: *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”* (Psalm 119:105)

The life of someone who tries to bury his grief under shallow diversions ends up resembling carnival music: superficially gay, yet at its core, inexpressibly sad. But for those who earnestly seek Him where He will be found, God promises the treasure of all treasures: to reveal deep down within us, the mind of Christ.!

Holy Spirit of God, make us faithful seekers.

Amen.

Hebrews 12:5-11

⁵ And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little

while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Psalm 126

¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

John 16:20-24

²⁰ Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ²¹ A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. ²² So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. ²³ In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.