

"It's Not Laughter, But Our Tears That Make Us Grow"

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

06 November 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: 1 Peter 2:4-10

Hebrews 12:1-3

"and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, ."

~ Hebrews 12:2a

Prayer

Holy God,

We are grateful for this day

When we remember with thanksgiving the lives of those

Who have gone before us.

We give thanks for the saints in our lives

Who laid the foundations of love and faith

That enable us to live and believe more fully.

Surround us now with your comforting Presence

And may we find hope and peace in your living word. Amen.

At the very heart of the Christian faith, there is a persistent, unequivocal and indisputable emphasis on life lived in community. The writer of the First Letter of Peter waxed poetic as he tried to convey this communal nature of the Christian life. "[Like] **living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.**" "[You] **are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.**" "**Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.**" From these few verses we heard this morning, it is clear the writer wanted the first followers of Christ to think of themselves as a close-knit community drawn together into a sacred story told by God, lived out by Christ, and kept alive by the Holy Spirit. The careful language in this passage is meant to make it absolutely clear that no one can be Christian alone, isolated from the Church Universal, disconnected from the community of Jesus-followers and disengaged from the stories that shape the faith of the communion of saints. Individualism has no place in the fellowship of Christ's followers. The American cultural ideal that celebrates self-sufficiency, private spirituality, believing without belonging and do-it-alone-your-own-way is irreconcilable with the Christian faith, which anchors our lives in a community that has as its foundational narrative a story about compassionate, self-giving, self-forgetting, sacrificial friendship and solidarity.

We tend to think that Christmas, the miraculous birth of a baby, and Easter, the celebration of life that defies even death, are the defining stories of the Christian faith. And, to an extent, they are. There would be no Christian story to tell without the Child of the manger and it is very unlikely that the Church would even exist today if the Christian story

had ended at the cross without the hope of the resurrection. But, there is another story in the Christian Scriptures that infuses our faith with meaning and defines who we are as a community molded by the life of Jesus of Nazareth – the last meal in the upper room. In our church, we remember the Last Supper every month. In a few minutes, we will do it again. We will gather around the Table to look back at the moment when Jesus told his first disciples that his body would be broken and his blood would be shed. Almost 2,000 years later, we still gather to remember that harrowing evening when everything Jesus had taught and promised seemed to be disintegrating. It is the memory of the very moment when Jesus felt extremely vulnerable, and the first disciples faced the collapse of everything they held sacred that Christians around the world choose not to forget. Every month, we remember the time and the place where the story of our faith almost fizzled out and the Jesus movement appeared to have come to a dead end. The Church is grounded in this story of grief and heartbreak, angst and trepidation, vulnerability and uncertainty when the world as you know it appears to be coming apart.

A couple of weeks ago, my mother repeated the same words she has said to me every time I have gone through a rough patch in my life, ***“It’s not laughter, but our tears that make us grow.”*** When I was younger, I used to feel a tad annoyed at this notion that people have to hit rock-bottom or come to the end of the rope or suffer a great loss or watch the life they dreamed about fall apart or face their own finitude and mortality to evolve and mature, to learn what means to be human, to deepen their spirituality, to awaken to the true purpose of human life, to get in touch with their true self and to have a bigger and more compassionate heart. Honestly, I resented my mother’s words until I finally heard the timeless wisdom of philosophy, poetry, and religion echoing in her distinctly carioca accent, ***“Não são nossos risos, mas nossas lágrimas que nos fazem crescer.”*** ***It’s not laughter, but our tears that make us grow.”***

Poet Christian Wiman, who was diagnosed with a rare and incurable form of blood cancer on his 39th birthday in 2005, has devoted much of his time, energy, intellect and faith to putting into articles and books this idea that tears, pain, sorrow, loss, and suffering are not just an inevitable part of life, but that there is something sacred in them that can potentially transform us and make us grow. Wiman recognizes that this assertion about the sacredness of our tears and troubles ***“sticks in the modern throat.”***¹ Humanity remains alarmingly fearful of our incompleteness and the precariousness of our existence. We do anything and everything to avoid feeling powerless, unguarded, helpless, needy, and broken. Our society has taught us to hide our tears, to be ashamed of our needs, to dread ageing and losing our independence, to be afraid of illness, to conceal our weaknesses and to orient our attention away from suffering and death. We often push our pain underground and keep on smiling because we do not know how or are not able to show our emotions, especially the emotions that expose the incompleteness of our lives. Christian Wiman noted in one of his articles that this was not always the case. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Aeschylus, the great Athenian dramatist, said, ***“Pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”*** Half a century later, St. Peter wrote,

“But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” Skip a millennium and we hear these words from Rumi, ***“Keep looking at the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you.”*** The German philosopher Nietzsche declared, ***“The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—know ye not that it is only this discipline that has produced all of the elevations of humanity hitherto?”***ⁱⁱ And Jesus said to his friends, ***“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.”***ⁱⁱⁱ

The founding story of the Church, the Lord’s Supper, reveals the unadulterated humanity of Christ and, more importantly, how Jesus refused to be the kind of religious person who masks the depth of his very human emotions or is uncomfortable with the language of feelings. By making careful preparations for his last meal with his closest friends in the upper room, Jesus taught the disciples an invaluable lesson about the community he was bringing together: no one should cry, hurt, or suffer alone in the Church. In our society, most people instinctively pull away from those who are in great pain. We are so out of touch with our own humanness and our own feelings that we do not know how to handle another person’s tears and suffering. Our hearts seldom have the capacity to take in other people’s grief. If the community of his followers were to be drastically different from a mad world that wants to expunge pain and suffering from life, Jesus knew that his friends would have to learn how to create room in their hearts for real and raw human emotions because tears and pain come with being human whether we like it or not. So, Jesus spoke openly, carefully, and intentionally about his betrayal, his suffering and his own fast approaching death. As Carly Simon sang, ***“There’s more room in a broken heart.”***^{iv} Jesus knew the last supper would break the heart of the community of his followers and he hoped their hearts would break open and have plenty of room for each other’s pain and for the suffering of the world. In the upper room, he gave his friends an example of how to lean on each other, rely on each other, how to come together in times of anguish and distress, how not to be uneasy around human incompleteness and suffering, and how to have a heart with enough room to show compassion for another human being. ***“Compassion,”*** Christian Wiman wrote, ***“is someone else’s suffering flaring in your own nerves.”***^v At the table of his last supper, Jesus invited the community of disciples to feel his own pain so they might grow into human beings who would love each other with a self-giving and compassionate love that would inspire the Christian community to show up and be present with others who felt as if they had come to the end of their own stories and to the edge of their lives.

Julia Kasdorf wrote a poem entitled *“What I Learned From My Mother,”* which I think captures the essence of what Jesus hoped the community that gathers in his name would do best whenever faced with the tears, pain, sorrow, brokenness and the horror of human pain and suffering.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

***"I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch."***^{vi}

What we learn from the story of the Lord's Supper is that we have a call to enter every situation of loss and pain with unwavering compassion and the tenderest care possible without losing hope for suffering and tears to be transformed into opportunities for healing, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for friendship, for communion, for growth and for a richer life.

The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is "***the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.***" In the original Greek, the words have a more robust and complementary meaning. The author claims that Jesus is the originator and the fulfillment of our faith. He embodies what the Christian life is supposed to look like. His story not unlike ours is a story of growth that came from moments of loss, grief, hostility, pain, disappointment, aloneness, anxiety, fear, tears and suffering. Through it all, Jesus never gave up on his friends, even when they broke his heart. He never walked away from the community of disciples. Jesus never turned away people with broken hearts and tears of sorrow clinging to their eyelashes. Jesus never stopped believing as Henri Nouwen put it, [that] "***community is where hope can grow in the world.***"^{vii} Jesus never once wavered in his conviction that the community of faith is a shelter of compassion in the world where people know they are not alone. Jesus set an example for the Church. This is why we keep remembering the Last Supper. He showed us that moments of deep suffering, days of sorrow, those times when we felt like we went through hell, and the dark nights of the soul can be sacred if we allow them to

create more room in our hearts for the fragility of human life, for our emotions, for compassionate love, for solidarity and for those who suffer.

This morning, when we gather around the Lord's Table, we will light a candle in memory of loved ones who have died. The writer of Hebrews tells us that our loved ones are saints who have joined the great cloud of witnesses. They lived through losses and grief, disease and pain, rose above their troubles, had room in their hearts to love us, did their best to hold on to their faith and found in Christ the strength and courage to finish the race of life. Kahlil Gibran wrote in one of his poems, "**Remembrance is a form of meeting**."^{viii} This morning, as we meet in spirit and memory those we loved and lost, I hope you know this is a gathering where your raw emotions, your sorrow and your deep sense of loss are sacred. I pray that your memories of those who are gone and your tears can make your heart roomier and encourage you look up to Christ the pioneer and perfecter of the faith of the great cloud of witnesses so you may have the strength to make something special, beautiful, loving, holy and compassionate from your pain and your suffering.

Friends, remember: it is our tears that make us grow, but in the community that gathers in Christ's name and is shaped by Christian story no one should cry, hurt or suffer alone.

And may the whole church say: Amen! May it be so.

ⁱ By Christian Wiman in The Cancer Chair, Harper's Magazine [<https://harpers.org/archive/2020/02/the-cancer-chair/>].

ⁱⁱ Quotes by Christian Wiman in The Cancer Chair, Harper's Magazine [<https://harpers.org/archive/2020/02/the-cancer-chair/>].

ⁱⁱⁱ John 12:24-25 [The Message].

^{iv} Song by Carly Simon – "Coming Around Again," 1987.

^v Christian Wiman in My Bright Abyss, p. 122 [Kindle edition].

^{vi} By Julia Kasdorf in What I Learned From My Mother, Poetry Foundation [<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48491/what-i-learned-from-my-mother>].

^{vii} Henri Nouwen in Community, p. 61.

^{viii} By Kahlil Gibran in Sand and Foam, University of Michigan [<https://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/gibran/sandfoam/sandfoam.htm>].