

LIKE A WATERED GARDEN

Bearing the Seed

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 126

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

***"Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."***

Psalm 126:6

Around here we like to say "Life is a journey!" It is certainly a sentiment I resonate with, but not everyone thinks so. Some people say that life is just a bunch of random moments and if we wrote them all down we wouldn't find a story. They would say that we are the ones who create the story to make sense out of our lives. Maybe so. And maybe that is just splitting hairs. But I like to think that our tendency to see a story is one of God's great gifts to us; seeing a story points to something deep and real and profound at work beneath the apparent randomness of things. I believe your life is a story, a sacred journey, and so is mine...so is our life together as a church.

That is why I like "narrative theology" so much. "Narrative theology" is a powerful way to enter into "God-talk" and the quest for the Spirit. "Narrative theology" asks us to not only exam our sacred story found in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but to also examine our own life experiences; to see what consequences, meanings, lessons to be learned, and memories to be kept are to be found there. Naming our story with God in the past and present enables us to move into the future consciously with confidence, with imagination and purpose, with hope. We are pilgrims on a journey, with something behind us and something before us, with crucial steps to take out of our past and toward our future this very day.

In ancient Israel people journeyed together singing. On pilgrimage to Jerusalem they sang from fifteen songs, which are included in the Bible's book of Psalms. They are called the "Songs of Ascent," or songs for "going up" to Jerusalem. These psalms sing of where the pilgrims came from and of where they were headed. They sing of what the pilgrims felt in between. And according to the psalm before us today, the between time wasn't so good. As the pilgrims walk, they sing of weeping. For now, on their journey through time, there are some tears in their eyes. You can tell especially by the way they look over their shoulders at how things used to be...by how they speak of "then." "Then" was a better time...but that time is no more. They had once been given a marvelous gift, and they remembered it well: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream; *then* our mouth was filled with laughter...*then* our tongue offered shouts of joy."

Can you recall such times? You were younger. You had more innocence in your life. Maybe God seemed somehow more real, more present, more knowable. Have you had days when your

mouths were filled with laughter? Have you ever felt the energy and the excitement that comes from dreaming? Dreaming about future plans...dreaming about love, dreaming about a better world, a better church, a better life? The pilgrims to Jerusalem recalled such days, but their current state of being was missing the laughter and the dreaming. They longed for the laughter and the dreaming again. And their longing was their prayer: "Lord, restore our fortunes."

In their song, they offered a perfect metaphor for what they had become and what they wanted. It was the image of the desert with dried-up streambeds, old watercourses now parched and cracked. It happened every summer in Israel, the streambeds would go dry. And they would have to wait for winter for the water to come rushing back, irrigating that desert back to a garden oasis. That's what we are like, they sang. We're shaped for streams to flow through us and for life to spring up green and glad around us, but we are empty, dry and cracked, and all around us is dust and death. When will our lives be refreshed again? How long do we have to wait? "Restore our fortunes, Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb."

Then, all of a sudden, the song changes. I imagine that the rhythm slows down, the volume is lowered, the melody turns sweeter, yet haunting. Here are the words that end the song: "Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

Now, if you grew up like I did, you may be tempted to burst into a rendition of that old hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves." I can still hear my grandmother singing that song in her United Baptist Church in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Her church believed in singing vocal music only. Pianos and instruments were of the devil. But they would sing with great gusto!

Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

There now, I hope you feel better. I do. That song comes right from Psalm before us today.

However, the psalmist paints us a peculiar picture really: shedding tears while sowing seed... weeping as you plant. Like a good poem, it is not always easy to say exactly what it all means. If we were to sit around and ponder the meaning of these words together, we might arrive at very different ideas. Our own life narratives would certainly play a part in how we make sense of this strange picture. For me, I think this psalm is seeking to make the deep connection between our grief and our hope.

Planting seeds is an exercise in hope. Plant a bulb in the fall or a tree in the spring, and as you do, your mind is filled with pictures of the growing that will come, the lovely things that the planting will yield.

Planting certainly isn't grief work. Some of you will plant your flowers and vegetables soon. Will you cry while you plant? I can't imagine Tom Harry or Juli Burnell or Fred Madden...some of our known gardeners, out in their gardens this spring blubbering over each seed or plant sown! That is why I say this image is odd.

Maybe this image is about the poor who live on whatever grain they can grow. For them, sowing seed has an element of risk. Here is good grain in a sack. It's food in your hand. But to plant, requires that you throw food to the ground. You lose it for your use now. You cast it away in hopes of a greater harvest. You understand that in sowing, the seed may or may not yield a harvest, depending on weather, disease, animals and bugs.

There is reason for having hope – hope is necessity if you're to live next year; but there's a risk in it, a death of what you had in hand. People long ago understood this. But for those of us who grew up and live in the city, this is a life process we largely ignore or fail to experience first hand.

Did you know that there are ancient writings that report Canaanites and Egyptians weeping as they sowed seed? For them it was the burial of a god. But isn't hope at least a little like that? Without letting something go, how can you reach for a new thing?

And that's not the only way that grief and hope are linked. Look at this global world we live in that brought to live and in color on our TV screens; look at this country; look at the Christian Church that we find ourselves in; look at your life. To look honestly is to grieve – to grieve all that is wrong, twisted, broken; to grieve all kinds of death, failure, loss, and injustice. And this is know: no one whose heart hasn't broken is in any real position to hope for anything...to hope for abundant life, for freedom, for justice, for peace, for love.

I am afraid we don't cry enough these days. Who and what are you crying over these days? We really don't take time to cry much these days. Our lives are way too busy; way to numb to the pain of the world and the pain of our own lives; way to self-protected from risk and vulnerability. And here's the problem: if we aren't willing to weep, then we aren't hoping very well. In 1959 Thomas Merton, in a letter to a friend, said that we "Should all be sick in some way. We should all feel near to despair in some way because semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours...Hope in spite of the sickness that fills us."

There is a difference between hope and optimism. Optimism thinks that we're able to do anything and that everything will work out. But hope understands that we are dying; that some of what's broken is past fixing; and some of what's lost can't be gotten back. Hope sees all of this with honesty and with eyes wide open, and grieves it, but it never stops there. Hope then dares to pray, to love, to risk, to trust, to act toward transformation anyway. And so the tears are turned to seeds...seeds that are planted toward a future that belongs to God.

In Montgomery, Alabama, outside the Southern Poverty Law Center, is a Civil Rights Memorial. It was designed by Maya Lin, who also designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. The Civil Rights Memorial is a huge circular table of black granite. Into the stone are carved dates, places, and events that define the civil rights struggle in this country and the names of many who were killed. On the wall above the stone are the words from the prophet Amos, words that were often quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. with just the first word altered: "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Across the stone table a sheet of water is constantly moving over these names and dates. You can touch the water as it slowly washes over the names on the stone, and you hear it always flowing.

On the day the monument opened, one of those who came was the mother of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered in Mississippi. As she touched her son's name on the stone beneath the moving water, she began to weep. Maya Lin was there and saw the grieving mother's tears falling, mingling with the stream that washed across the stone.

"Restore our fortunes, Lord, like the watercourses of the Negeb." And the tears of those who rightly grieve will swell the streams of the new life we long for. Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Our tears, mingled with God's tears, can help to make it so. Our tears can help us to create that "well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry" in the vision of the prophet Isaiah that has been before during this season of Lent. Such waters can reshape even the hard stone of our history. And the deserts we have made, or happen to find ourselves in, can blossom by the grace of God into the great surprise of new and renewed life. Grief and hope are inseparable!

Many of you know that I am highly involved in the work of Equality Ohio. I can tell you that my involvement with Equality Ohio was spurred by my tears. In fact, Equality Ohio itself was born out of the tears of many people across this state. After the anti gay marriage amendment was passed in 2004, I, along with many of you, cried. I still do.

And just this past September I sat through the hearings for the Equal Housing and Employment Act in the Ohio House of Representatives. This bill, once passed (and it *will* pass!), will be the first pro-GLBT legislation to ever be enacted in the state of Ohio. But during the hearings, I listened to one Christian after another speak their opposition to the bill. Embarrassingly, disappointingly, it was only “Christians” who spoke against the bill. And I cried some more.

And when I watch politicians and religious leaders turn their back in fear to the injustices named and experienced by GLBT people...I cry.

But if I didn't cry, I don't think I would be empowered or motivated to agitate for justice and equal rights for GLBT people. I don't think I would be willing to give my money to the work of Equality Ohio and be willing to ask repeatedly for other people to join me. I don't think I would give of my time and energy to help Equality Ohio succeed in its vision “to create an Ohio where everyone feels at home.” I don't think I would travel from classrooms to churches all across the Miami Valley speaking the word of life and love and justice and peace. Yes, I cry, but out of my tears are born the seed of hope.

And this past Friday night, I had the wonderful privilege of hosting an Equality Ohio event at El Meson Restaurant. One of things we did was recognize the Representatives from our area who voted “YES” for EHEA. And as many of you know 3 out the 5 Republicans who voted yes, are from the Miami Valley...and it makes me very proud! Anyway, we had a great time with these legislators. And it felt good to cry tears of joy for a change. It feels so good right now...that we are so close to passing our first proactive GLBT law in the State of Ohio this year! All of this is mingled with tears of grief...AND HOPE!

Pilgrims to Jerusalem sang this song of planted tears. There came a day Jesus of Nazareth made that pilgrimage. Along with his fellow traveling companions, he must have sung this very song. We all know where he was headed. We all know that he wept horribly. But the tears that fell to the ground from his face were like seeds of hope for us all. And we have tasted the fruit of the harvest he planted and we follow now in his way with gratitude and awe. But let us not forget that we also follow him with our own grief for all that is so terribly broken in the world and in us. But out of whatever grieving we must do we trust that from it can emerge the “new thing” that God is about to do; we trust that from it can emerge new choices to pray fervently, to love deeply, to act with courage, justice and care. So out of whatever grieving we must do, we will be planting hope. Hope for the world and for ourselves. Hope in the One who planted very well for the harvest that leads, in the end, to shouts of joy.

Amen.