

"Tears and Laughter"

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 11:35

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 15, 2015 – 4th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Laughing and crying are two forms of emotional expression. Both are well known to us. Yet, in our society, laughter is regarded as the more positive of the two. A good laugh is something to be valued. Just look at the prime-time television line-up if you doubt this. Fully half of the programs are comedies, or attempt to be. This ratio is similar for movies as well.

Crying, on the other hand, doesn't have the same attraction. Usually we try hard to avoid these situations. Most of what we commonly associate with crying is negative. People who weep are often regarded as weak. If they cry regularly, especially in public, they're seen as odd or emotionally unstable. We even use the expression "to break down" as a synonym for crying.

We don't hide our laughter when we're with others, but we usually are embarrassed about shedding tears. We don't want to appear to be a child or to do something socially inappropriate. We usually choose to run away and hide rather than to be seen overcome with emotion. So we most often cry alone. It's even a bit awkward to think about the subject.

Why do we cry? Well, we cry out of need, like a baby does when hungry. It expresses, in no uncertain terms, that something important is missing. Adults can cry, too, when something is likewise absent from our lives—perhaps something crucial like companionship. To feel alone and cry for a deep and abiding friendship is to make known a basic need.

We also cry out of fear. When we feel threatened and vulnerable, the tears come out of our discomfort. This kind of crying acknowledges that we are sometimes challenged to protect ourselves from harm. Fear is a way that we come to grips with an external danger and, in defense, mobilize ourselves for what lies ahead.

Anger is something else that may make us cry. We can become so enraged, so upset that our emotions overflow in tears. It's as if something has got to get out of us. When words are not enough, then something else must relieve the tension before we burst. Children show this clearly in a tantrum. Adults sometimes exhibit the same behavior. Sometimes it can be in very inopportune times, like behind the wheel of a car.

We cry out of remorse. We have done something or said something and now we're exceedingly sorry. Maybe our remorse is over what we failed to do. We are sorry for how it affected another. The feeling may even be stronger when it is impossible to make sufficient amends to offset the original action. We can begin to weep whenever we think of that person or situation.

We cry out of regret. When we think about what might have been a tear may streak down our cheek. Often this has to do with lost opportunities of one sort or another. These are

melancholy feelings and more subtle than other emotions that may cause us to cry. Regret is often felt late at night when the house is quiet and we are suddenly alone with our thoughts.

And we cry out of pain-- physical pain and emotional pain. The threshold of what we can bear has been crossed and we can't stop the tears. They come involuntarily. Not until the pain subsides, or we are all cried out, can we stop. Sometimes the pain that we feel is really another's pain, but our empathy treats it as if it were our own. Perhaps this is what occurs in the incident from which our morning scripture is drawn.

What has happened is this. Jesus' friend, Lazarus, has died. Word of this reaches him in Galilee and he goes from there to Bethany, the home of Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus. It is hard to travel under such bad news.

In John it says this: "When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before ... Many Judeans had come to see Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother's death.

"Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died. But I know even now God will give you whatever you ask for.'

"Your brother will rise to life,' Jesus told her.

"I know,' she replied, 'that he will rise to life on the last day.

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die, and those who live and believe in me will never die.'

"Jesus saw Mary weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. And Jesus wept."

Verse 35 is one of the shortest in the whole Bible, but it is long on description. In a poignant and moving way it shows us the depths of his feelings. The pain of those around him became Christ's pain as well. His tears were real and genuine on that day. To be divine is not to be empty of feeling, but perhaps even more acutely aware. Surely some divinity of this kind is in each one of us.

A young woman named Connie had lost her son a few months before Christmas one year. He had just turned three and he was the pride of her life. Connie was in a department store when she stopped to watch the children come up one by one and sit on Santa's lap. They each told the old man what they wanted and soon hurried off in glee.

Then a little boy about three came up and jumped on Santa's knee. He had the same blond, curly hair as her own son. She watched and began to cry. The tears streamed down her face and she made no attempt to hide them. Her pain was so real at that moment that she was powerless to stop the emotions from coming forward.

After the little boy left, the store Santa did something rather unprecedented. He motioned for the woman to come to him, and Connie found herself moving as if by an automatic response.

He invited her to sit on his lap and proceeded to ask her why she was so unhappy this Christmas. She told him about Bobby and about her heart that was broken.

Santa Claus cradled her in his big arms and wiped away her tears with his soft sleeve. He kissed her cheek gently and whispered, "Your healing can now begin. That will be your gift this Christmas."

When she got up Connie felt a certain lightness, as though a weight that was crushing her had now been lifted. She turned to thank the bewhiskered old man who gave her this comfort and hope. Then she noticed the tears on his own cheeks. Connie knew her pain had been entered into and shared, and that was the real miracle that had occurred in those few minutes.

Accepting another's tears is a most meaningful gift. So is listening without judging. It is the point where two hearts meet and find their common ground. And if we are not sure what our role should be when another is crying, we can simply be there with them and pass the tissues. When a person is in pain and grief the most comforting thing is to know that it's not faced alone.

The story of Jesus begins and ends with his mother's tears--tears of joy and tears of agony. Jesus himself cried over Jerusalem and over his friend, Lazarus, and over his own fate. Through his full humanity he was able to be in touch with the real essence in those lives which crossed his.

It seems to me that there is a lesson here, so you might try this: keep track of the events which bring a tear to your eye this year. They may be happy moments or sad moments or moments that on the surface may be clouded as to their meaning. However they come, they are surely moments in which you will have been stirred to your roots.

Know that at those roots God is at work in your life. Examine those times with care and ask why they bring you tears. If you do, you will learn something about God and yourself, too. Tears reveal the deeper side of life, who and what we really care about.

It's not wrong to allow ourselves to cry out of the pain we feel inside or in sympathy for another. This is a natural thing to do, although we tend to resist. Tears are never out of place in a family, in friendship, or in a church. They serve an important purpose.

Today's scripture shows Jesus crying compassionately. You see the Good News really is about a Savior who loves us so much that he can cry for us in our pain. He is with us when we don't think we need him and at those times we definitely do. And through his sacrifice, we are given the possibility of unlimited new beginnings.

Our tears are natural and provided us for a reason: they carry away the hurts of life. And as they dry, and as we heal, we may once again find how wonderful it is to be able to simply laugh.