

Smiles & Tears

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Once again, it is good to be back here among you in the sanctuary at Messiah. It's a blessing to get back up in the saddle and try to ride this horse called preaching.

I've been telling folks that it took me about six weeks to kind of get everything Messiah out of my mind as I went on sabbatical, so it's probably going to take about six weeks to get back in that saddle and start riding forward with you again. If I seem a little bit dizzy than normal, it's simply because I am.

I wanted to begin on this note, and it might sound overly dire, but I don't think so in the long run:

I think we are a nation in tears, but are we able to see our neighbors cry?

It is a picture of us that I observed over and over again on my 14 weeks away. I spent a lot of time observing my neighbors: not just those who lived in my neighborhood, but folks I would see in the store, at Starbucks, out for a walk, or gathered in a park.

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One of the things I observed as I was out and about was there's a certain subtle cruelty that has settled in amongst us. That cruelty—sometimes just the shock of it—masks the chaos that so many people experience in their daily life in so many ways:

isolation, loneliness, mean-spiritedness. It's almost like we are all cornered animals, and we are going to lash out at anything that gets a little too close to us.

I saw this one morning in June. School was still in session for most school districts, and I was sitting in Starbucks having some coffee. A young woman came in with two kids who were being a little bit rambunctious, and an older woman was in line with them.

The older woman said, *Oh, what are you doing?*

The younger one said, *I'm taking my children to school.*

Oh, I hope it's a private school, the older woman said.

The younger woman began to cry, and she said, *what makes you think I would want to do that or could even afford it?*

And what really struck me was as the tears rolled down her eyes, the other woman didn't seem to notice. She just kept talking about how horrible our public schools are.

I think we are a nation in tears, but do we see our neighbors cry?

Not much later—as the younger woman sat down with her kids at a table having a little bit of breakfast before school—an older gentleman came and sat down. He just talked to the kids and gave the young mother a little opportunity to get up, use the restroom, and come back.

She thanked that older gentleman and said, *I haven't had even a few seconds to myself since I woke up at 4 a.m., so thank you.*

Kindness.

Helping.

Little communities of friendship and grace.

Hugs.

These things also happen.

So, when I say I think we are a nation in tears, I think *some of us* can see our neighbors cry.

There is a book that will be coming out next May by Benjamin Perry titled *Cry Baby: Why Our Tears Matter*. This quote from the book touched me deeply:

Learning to suppress our tears is a violence we're forced to commit against ourselves, training us to participate in systems that demand we disregard our neighbors' suffering.

Think about this: emotional tears have higher protein concentration than irritant tears which makes them fall down your cheeks more slowly, increasing the chance that they will be seen and solicit care.

In other words, we are literally built for community.

I think we are a nation in tears. I am hopeful that we might see our neighbors cry.

Underneath some of these difficulties that I have been talking about—difficulties in coming together as a community that sees one another, knows one another, and ultimately ends up loving one another—there are these wonderful words that Lauren read from Psalm 104. These words are a testimony to some things that God is doing among us that—unless we are trained to see them—we may not notice.

The Psalmist says, *O Lord, you have set the earth on its foundations so that it should never, ever be shaken.*

There is a permanence to life on this earth and a certain foundation that God has set here among us that we can stand on together.

We do not live in a quicksand world, no matter what the news media might say. We live in a God-anointed, God-created world, and even the waters that sometimes seem so chaotic to us also are what give life.

O Lord God, you are very great, clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as a garment.

Underneath all the trials and tribulations of our world, there is good news: God has created an environment in which there is the possibility that we might learn how to come together as neighbors.

Experiencing that kind of God in creation is a good reason to be here, but Ephesians sees the possibility for gathering as a community from a little different perspective.

Christ, Ephesians says, has been raised, ascended to heaven? If Christ isn't here anymore, why are we? Why are we here in this tumultuous, chaotic place called life on earth? It raises this weird question and then lets us in on some clues to that.

Ephesians writes:

God has blessed us in Christ.

God has chosen us in Christ before the foundations of the world.

God has chosen us.

Blessed us.

Adopted us.

Poured out lavish grace upon us.

Redeemed us.

Forgiven us for a purpose.

This purpose is very simple: that we become visible signs that God is actually working to gather and unite all things.

with all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will according to the good pleasure that he set forth in Christ a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.

We folks in Christ are the visible signs that this is what God actually wants to have happen here on this earth.

I want to ask this: what happens to all that rain that will fall this fall in winter? What actually happens to it in the end? Where does it go? Where does it end up? Back in the ocean?

The ocean.

The salt water that we poured into our baptismal font this morning.

In the end, the ocean gathers all those things together as another visible sign of what God wants to see happen among us. Each and every separate water molecule finding its way home and gathered together again. In that sense, communities of faith like Messiah are oceans where people of all sorts of differences and diversities get gathered together like the water in our font.

And you know what? Every one of those tears that we cry, they can be gathered together here too. Gathered as one in the love of God, in Christ that's made visible through us. That's why we're here on this earth, people!

After that long night on the sea, the fisherman James and John Simon probably wondered *what was the purpose of it all?*

They'd spent all night fishing and had gotten nothing for their work, until Jesus bids them to go back out and says, *throw those nets over. One more thing, one more time, and as you do, you are going to gather this vast harvest of fish into one net.*

What an amazing image for us as God's people, to be a community that catches up people: in love, in their hurts, in their pains, in their joys, in their celebrations. To catch up all people into one place where their tears are not ignored or their celebrations denied. It's who we are. It's what we're called to do.

I finish this morning—my first time back in the saddle—with this invitation to everybody. When you go out today, take a fishing pole with you: into the supermarket, into the coffee shop, into a restaurant, out onto the ball field. Wherever you go, take a fishing pole with you. A metaphorical one.

(Okay, you can bring a real one if you want to).

I tell you; I learned about this fishing pole on my sabbatical. It's amazing, I hadn't realized it worked so well to catch people! You know what that fishing pole is? It took me 14 weeks to learn this. The best fishing pole that gathers in the catch, binds them together like the net in the gospel reading? It's very simple, and you actually carry it with you all the time. A smile. A simple smile.

I have been practicing toward the end of my sabbatical. Once I figured it out, catching people up together with a smile. I try to do it every time I see a new face, which is a wonderful learning from sabbatical for me.

I told Tia this morning I started my sabbatical wondering if I liked people anymore. One smile can change your whole attitude, about yourself and about everyone around you.

Smile, folks. It's the gift God gave you. Let's share it with one another, and those around us.