

Just Breathe

Nehemiah 8:8-12

They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God." All the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. And Nehemiah continued, "Go and celebrate with a feast of choice foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!" And the Levites, too, quieted the people, telling them, "Hush! Don't weep! For this is a sacred day." So the people went away to eat and drink at a festive meal, to share gifts of food, and to celebrate with great joy because they had heard God's words and understood them.

Can you remember the first time you ever saw someone cry tears of joy? Or the first time it happened to you? It's confusing, because we so strongly associate tears with sadness or pain. It's hard to understand how an opposite emotion can produce the same result. In our Scripture reading this morning, instead of sadness and joy causing the same action, we have one action causing both sadness and joy.

Our story begins when the exiles return home. When the Babylonian Empire conquered the Israelites, their strategy was to divide the people. Literally. They sent half of the Israelites away to Babylon, and left some of their own citizens in their place. And although it was a harsh way to deal with the Israelites, it was an effective way to get them to adapt to their new culture. After about 50 years, the Israelites were allowed to return home. But they had been in exile so long, they really had taken on a new way of life. They had forgotten those things that made them distinctively Israelite. Imagine being laid off from your job for so long that when you finally return, you don't remember how to do your job. It was kind of like that.

But instead of forgetting their job description, the Israelites had forgotten the laws of Moses. They had forgotten their history, their stories, their Scriptures. When they returned from exile, their first order of business was to restore order. They had to rebuild their homes and businesses, they had to repair the wall that offered them security. Their first order of business

was to get back to the business of living. But after they'd been home for about seven months, the prophet Ezra called them back to their religious roots.

He pulls out the Scriptures, and everyone gathers in the square to hear them be read aloud. This wasn't one of those men-only events either. It was men, women, and even children, as long as they were old enough to grasp the importance. There were priests scattered throughout the crowd, interrupting Ezra under their breath for the people around them. They were interpreting for the people what they were hearing. What did that mean? Why is that in there? Reading the Word of God out loud was important. These Scriptures told their story and gave them their identity. When people heard these words for the first time in generations, they cried. And not just leak-out-the-corner-of-your-eye tears. They wept. They were dejected.

But here's the thing. Ezra and the priests told the people not to cry. Not to feel guilty for having been far from these words. Instead, they were to celebrate their return! To have a feast with all the best, most sumptuous foods. They were to be festive and to share what they had with those who couldn't afford to celebrate. This was a sacred moment, and therefore, a moment of joy!

Now I don't know about you, but I don't immediately associate the word 'sacred' with 'joy.' Sacred seems to mean subdued, hushed tones. It means whispering and sitting still. It means approaching the holy with fear and trembling. But here's Ezra, saying that "the joy of the Lord is your strength!" Not the drudgery of the Lord, or obedience to the Lord, or guilt from the Lord. But the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Our lives will always have moments of up and down, sorrows mixed in with the joys. But our relationship with God is supposed to be one of joy. One of festivity and celebration. I know there are pastors and teachers and others out there who will tell you that if you don't have joy in

your life with God, that you just need to work on your spiritual growth. But I've got to tell you, work doesn't sound like a good way to foster joy.

Have you ever thought about that? We work at it to improve our relationships. We work on spiritual growth. When the church has a problem, we assign a committee to work on it. But what do we do if we want to improve on the violin or at football? We play! We play the violin; we play football. I don't think many people would pay \$40 face value for a ticket to watch the Badgers work at football.

If we want our relationship with God to bring us joy, we have to play at our relationship with God. That would mean letting our relationship with God be more like a relationship with any person. Instead of having a checklist of holy things to do, the joy of the Lord is a way of being, a way of living. It's kind of like this:

[play video of four hands Brazilian guitar 2:30]

I'm sure they had to practice a lot to make that happen, but they weren't working at it; they were playing music. And if this is an illustration of relationship with God, there are a couple things that stand out to me. First, in order to even begin playing together, one had to almost embrace the other. This isn't like playing a duet on the piano where your biggest problem is making sure you can both fit on the piano bench. They guitarists had to find a way to intertwine their bodies so they could both reach the guitar and still be able to move their hands. We have to embrace God's spirit in our lives, and we have to allow God's love to embrace us. We can't be in a joyful relationship with God if we're stiff and awkward or sitting the next chair over. We have to be willing to let God's spirit weave through our lives.

Second, did you see the joy on their faces? The woman especially seemed to have one of those smiles that make your cheeks hurt. This wasn't just playing music for them. It was delight,

it was joy, it was fun! They smiled and laughed and moved their bodies with the music. When we let God's spirit weave through our lives, there is a sense of being tangled up in joy. Tangled because we do have pain and sorrow and challenges in our lives. Because sometimes we feel closer to God, sometimes further. Tangled because God doesn't always move in and through us in ways that we would choose. But even in that imperfect relationship, there is the joy of knowing that God cares for you. The almighty creator of the universe knows you, and wants to be part of your life. You matter!

And finally, what was the result of this relationship, this joy? The crowd! They laughed, they clapped along. The people who witnessed this performance were changed by it. The guitarists don't sit down and say, "We're going to play a song, and you have to join in." The audience can't help but feel included by the music. When we have a joyful relationship with God, people around us can tell, whether we say it out loud or not. And when we live our lives intertwined with Christ, the people around us will be changed. Because it turns out Ezra was only half right. The joy of the Lord is your strength, but it is also the strength of all the world. Amen and amen.