

"Sad Isn't Bad"  
Psalm 137

Anthony de Mello tells this story. To a distressed person who came to him for help the Master said, "Do you really want a cure?"

"If I did not, would I bother to come to you?"?

"Oh yes Most people do."

"What for?"

"Not for a cure. That's painful. For relief."

To his disciples the Master said, "People who want a cure, provided they can have it without pain, are like those who favor progress, provided they can have it without change."

There is great wisdom in this short story because it captures the spirit of resistance that is in us when we face pain in our lives. Our immediate reaction to pain is to want to run away from it. Of course this is not all wrong. It is a way that is instilled in our brains that pain is to be avoided. This is how we stay alive and protect our bodies. But outside of the basic instinct of survival, our tendency to avoid pain is not always healthy. This is especially true when it comes to dealing with loss in our lives.

I remember when our daughter Sophia was about three years old and her gold fish died. Without even thinking about it, I rushed and flushed it down the toilet because my instinct was to protect my daughter from loss. Then I had to come up with flimsy excuses to her when she asked about the fish. As I reflected on the incident, I realized that I was doing her a disservice. I can't shield my daughter from loss and pain in life. What I can do is to teach her how to find grace in those times. Needless to say, the next time one of her pets died, which happened to be a hamster, we had a major funeral, shed many tears and talked many times about death and loss in life. That time I was ready.

In today's Bible story we hear about the way a whole people learned to grieve together. Psalm 137 is one of many Psalms of lament in the Bible. One third of the Psalms are Psalms of lament. This Psalm paints a powerful image of how deep the pain and grief of the people of Israel was. "By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." But what were the people lamenting? The reference to Babylon is about the loss the people of Israel experienced when their nation was invaded and conquered by the Babylonian Empire and the leaders of the country were exiled to the city of Babylon. The religious, economic, political and social leaders were sent 600 miles away from home where they were made servants to their captors. This was such a devastating loss to the people of Israel. Not only did they lose their independence and freedom, they also lost the center of their worship, the temple. To them God's presence was so connected to the temple in Jerusalem. But even that was taken away from them when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BCE. They literally lost everything that was near and dear to their hearts and most importantly they lost their faith. This was a nation that was built on the foundation of having God as their king and protector but here they were left without any of the old securities that they knew. It is believed by scholars that this experience of exile was one of the most important and most formative experiences for the people of Israel. That experience moved them to write several of the books of the Bible, to write down their oral practices and stories in order to preserve their faith and culture.

So, how did they deal with this catastrophe? They delved into the depth of their pain and expressed it before God in prayer. They did not run away from it. They did not try to get busy and cover it up in hopes of having it go away on its own. The collective wisdom of the people

was to lament the incredible loss and pain they had experienced. The last verse in this Psalm often makes people very uncomfortable because it is rather violent and angry, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" These words express deep anger which is an important part of the grief process. What is powerful about this is that the people of Israel felt open enough and comfortable enough to bring before God in their prayers how they felt honestly. Do you feel that comfortable before God? Do we allow ourselves to be open to the raw emotions of grief and pain when we experience loss? We are often taught to offer prayers of thanksgiving or supplication before God, but what about prayers of lament and anger? What about when life seems so unfair and the pain of loss pierces our hearts? Is there no place for us to share our anger, grief, and frustration? Are such prayers acceptable? Psalm 137 is an invitation for all of us to allow ourselves the freedom to grieve before God without restrictions and niceties. It is a model for prayer in those times when life hurts. Think of the many losses we experience in life: The death of a loved one, divorce, the death of a friendship, the loss of a job, the loss of physical ability, the loss of one's reputation, the loss of a dream, and many other losses. In our culture we are programmed to look for happiness and avoid any pain at all costs, but pain and loss are inevitable in life and sweeping them under the rug only makes them worse for us.

The wisdom of the ages, the wisdom of our faith ancestors, the people of Israel, was to face the pain and allow it to come to the light of God in all of its fullness and even ugliness and anger. There is no magic pill we can take that could heal the deep pain of loss in our lives. Grief like everything in all of life is a process that takes time, work and intentionality.

In his book, *Grieving: A Beginner's Guide*, Jerusha Hull McCormack gives some basic yet powerful advice for people who are experiencing loss. He writes that, "In becoming bereaved, you will find you have inadvertently joined an underground organization. The world is full of invisible sufferers — those who have lost someone through any manner of catastrophes. They are invisible because society prefers them to remain invisible. In our 'happy' society, it is simply more comfortable and convenient that we not be reminded of them. Nobody seeks to be a member of this club; but you had little choice in the matter." McCormack lists some rights for people in grief:

- You have a right to remain silent.
- You have a right to cry, any time and anywhere.
- You have a right to express your grief in ways that seem appropriate to you.
- You have a right to talk about your dead spouse/child/sibling/parent/friend as often as you would wish and on whatever occasions you wish to do so.
- You have a right to negotiate for time out from the usual schedules and obligations, so that you may honor your grief — and heal.
- You have a right to complete your grieving in your own time and in your own way, without being subject to the 'schedules' and expectations of others.
- You have a right to assert the centrality of the experience of grieving, within your own life and as it affects the lives of others.

These are simple affirmations. Yet they are powerful and important tools for healing. These are not intended to make you forget your loss. They are steps that help us find hope in the midst of loss. A few years ago, I heard a wise teacher by the name of Richard Groves say that the only way to deal with our pain is to go through it, not around it, above or underneath it.

But as we allow ourselves to go through the process of grief, it is important to remember that we are not alone. The Psalms of the Bible were not personal prayers written by individuals about their private matters. They were songs of the community of faith, sung by the people of God

together for the healing and wholeness of the whole community. The invitation is to walk this journey with others. You may be the one experiencing loss, but you may be the friend of someone who is experiencing loss. Wherever we are on this journey, we are invited to hold the space for each other and to affirm the love and presence of God for each other in this process. This takes a lot of preparedness on our part because our culture often tells us to help cheer someone up. There is nothing wrong with trying to make someone happy. The problem comes when we do not allow people the time and space to be sad. Being sad is not always bad. Of course, this is different from depression. Some things in life should make us sad and we should not try to avoid that sadness without dealing with the loss at hand.

We have the courage to be sad and to allow others around us to be sad because we know that ultimately we are never completely broken or alone. God is with us even in the worst of our circumstances, even if others forsake us, God will never ever let us go. Just like the people of Israel knew that even in the most horrific experience of pain in their history, God was still there with them, we know today that the love of God is with us and that nothing can take that away from us.

In her book, *Psalms of Lament*, Presbyterian Elder Ann Weems tells about her experience with grief and loss. She says that, "On August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky. My son, my Todd, had been killed less than an hour after his twenty-first birthday. August 14, 1982...and I still weep." Ann at that time had a lot of friends who supported her and came to be with her. One of these people was biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. He kept in touch with her long after the sympathy cards stopped. Ann says that, "One day he called and said I certainly didn't have to answer his questions if I didn't want to, but he was working on Jeremiah and wanted to ask me, Will Rachel be comforted? (This was a reference to Jeremiah 31:15 mentioning Rachel crying for her children) I remember answering with little hesitation: No. No, Rachel will not be comforted. Not here, not now, not in the sense of being ultimately comforted." Out of this experience Ann Weems began to face her grief and pain by writing fifty Psalms of lament that were published in 1995. These Psalms have comforted many people of faith and helped them express their pain. Through that experience Ann has found some hope and healing for her life as she expressed it in these words:

"In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
There is a deafening alleluia  
Rising from the souls,  
Of those who weep,  
And of those who weep with those who weep.  
If you watch, you will see  
The hand of God  
Putting the stars back in their skies  
One by one."

May our coming to the table of Christ, the table of brokenness and love give us the courage and hope to be free to face the losses of our lives because God is putting the stars back in our skies one by one. Amen.