

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to weep & called to shout"
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Presbyterians are not known for how emotional we are, so when it comes to the subject of our feelings and emotional life, many of us are uneasy, even awkward toward the subject. Also, being a man seems to present a challenge to this subject as well. But all of us deal with our emotions on a daily basis. It is a central part of who we are.

Many of us have put away much of our emotion because we were taught at an early age that big boys or girls don't cry. Many of us were taught to not show vulnerability, but to be strong and independent no matter what. These teachings have not proved wise over the years. A healthy emotional life allows us to identify what is happening inside, respond with appropriate words and actions, and emote in whatever way necessary. If we do not have this freedom, then we resort to denial, to stuffing down what needs to come up, and these strategies often lead to anger, depression, anxiety and many other unhealthy patterns.

Some cultural backgrounds insist on the repression or suppression of emotions. Others almost demand it. We can only determine what our own particular background is, and work from there. We can barely understand our own context and so should tread gently when talking to others about this subject.

There are many reasons for weeping, crying, sobbing, bawling, wailing. To lacrimate (that's the medical term) is to secrete a liquid from your eyes without serious impairment to your vision. Infants basically cry when disturbed physically, with hunger or a soiled diaper. They cry when they are angry. They cry when they are in pain.

Crying as a response to pain is common throughout our lives, whether physical pain, or emotional pain, such as that due to losses of various kinds. Crying comes for many of us when we are sad, shocked, have gone without sun light for weeks, and lots of other reasons. Many of us experience a kind of numbness when we have extraordinary stress, such as the loss of a family member, a divorce, loss of a job, an accident or health crisis. It is almost too much to emote, so instead we feel nothing.

Many of us cry in a transference context. What I mean by this is that we cry when we have entered into a story, whether it's a novel, a radio play, a movie, a theatre performance with a tragic event in it, or a happy reuniting, or something else that moves us deeply. We may not be able to cry in our own relationships, but when we see it on the screen, it really comes forth. Or sometimes we cry at weddings, due to happiness for the couple or perhaps something else. We transfer what we project onto others, and somehow can express emotion that we may or may not freely let flow in our relationships and lives.

The Bible speaks often about crying. We know that Jesus wept in John, chapter 11, when his friend Lazarus had died. He felt the pain of loss, and feels your pain of loss with you. The Bible talks about hell as a place of "weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12). I understand this to mean the deepest place of regret, having rejected relationship with God and dealing with the loneliness of that choice for the rest of eternity. On the other hand, heaven is a place where "our tears are wiped away." (Rev. 7:17, 21:4) I take this to mean that being in the presence of the Lord will heal the many losses, and great periods of grief that we have experienced in this life.

Some of us have had the experience of praying with tears. God collects these tears. In Revelation, John expresses these prayers as golden bowls filled with incense rising up to God, which is the prayer of the saints (Rev. 5:8; 8:3). We are moved deeply in prayer. Our tears come when we realize how much we are loved, how much God is doing in our lives, when we are deeply grateful and for many, many more reasons.

We have only spent a couple of Sundays with Joseph and his story from Genesis 37 – 50. We skipped over all that he had learned from the pit his brothers had put him in; to Potiphar's place where he was both faithful and falsely accused; to prison where he was forgotten, even after helping some important political figures of the day, and finally as Prime Minister. We pick up the story in Genesis 45 where Joseph can no longer hide who he is from his brothers. He weeps loudly, so loudly that his own servants and entourage can hear him in the next rooms with the doors closed.

It is hard to know exactly why Joseph was weeping so violently. But we can imagine that he knew that God had been faithful to him. He survived the pit and the slave trade. He survived living as a slave and being in prison, falsely

accused. He survived being forgotten by those who could help him. And it was more than survival; it was a deep trust in God. He seemed to work out whatever anger or grief within by testing his brothers, but not in a revengeful way. He wept at their being together again, the 12 brothers, with all the brokenness and competition and even the ugly murderous intent from so many years ago.

Now Joseph would weep with happiness due to their reunion, and not only of the brothers, but also of the extended family. And so through the faithful trust of one man in God, the nation of Egypt is saved, the nation of Israel, which just a family of a few hundred at that time was saved and many others in the known world were saved from famine and death, due to Joseph's gift of dream interpretation and his trusting God with the gift.

"From Prison to Prime Minister" sounds like a non-fiction novel for today. This is Joseph's story. It reminds us that a healthy trust in God includes ups and downs, sometimes severe, and also many tears. We sometimes tend to segregate our spiritual life from our emotional and intellectual lives, as if we were multiple personalities, but we are a psycho-social-spirituality unity. We are each just one person with many dimensions of experience.

I want to say that God can take our emotions, our sadness, our anger, our fear and anxiety. He wants us to express to him wherever we are. Our emotions are a gift from God. Tears cleanse our system in many ways. I don't know the neurochemical or biochemical processes involved, but I do know that we can be relieved through our expression of crying.

This also goes for crying out to God, shouting if you will. Throughout the Bible, the expression is found that people cry out to him. Now I know that many people shout when angry or volatile in some way. I understand why people can become frustrated and raise their voices. I generally don't recommend this in human relationships, but I know it happens frequently for many of us. However, in our relationship with God, I do recommend shouting. Now hear me out before you dismiss this.

The Matthew 15 passage we read has the Canaanite woman crying out to Jesus, "shouting" in the NRSV. The disciples are distressed by this and ask the Lord for permission to shut her up, or at least send her away. But he does not send away a person who was completely rejected and had no "rights" of any kind in that time and place. In fact, in the end, Jesus

commends her trust in him. But it all started with some shouting at a distance. Now you might want to find the right place and time for shouting at God. Perhaps this could happen when the apartment or house is empty. Perhaps in the woods or on the trail or wherever you know the exchange is just between you and God. But I believe there can be a cathartic release, a cleansing relief, in such shouting. We all need a place to release the heavy burdens we carry. God is willing to receive that weight.

The only question is whether our embarrassment, our shame, our anxieties about how others view us, will inhibit our freedom to express ourselves to God. Perhaps you need to shout back at the TV or radio, particularly when some anti-God, anti-Jesus, anti-justice, anti-compassion comments are aired.

There was a psychological movement thirty and forty years ago which expressed the theory that if you could "get it off your chest" by screaming it out. You could function better in the midst of the stress. This was called "primal scream." Some found relief in this, some didn't. Shouting obscenities in a group is an interesting experience, with many reactions by all those involved. But what I am proposing with God is a radical honesty where we don't hold back. If volume helps, use it wisely.

In summary, crying and shouting are not my expertise. I trust you will take these words and shift them through what the Holy Spirit says to you. As it is said in the 12 step groups, "take what you like and leave the rest." Sometimes the Scriptures take us places where we are not comfortable to walk. But when we go there with God, we can experience his blessing and hope.

With this in mind, let us pray.