

Rejoicing and Weeping

Romans 12:15

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Would you take a Bible please and turn to Romans 12:15. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

Why do we not? You might say, "Some people do: there are some weak, unstable characters and there are certain strong personalities who, when they are drunk, as the literal Greek translation of this verse runs, 'weep with weeping ones, rejoice with rejoicing ones.'" In other words there are certain weak personalities or certain strong personalities that when their self critical faculties are depressed by alcohol are so open to the surrounding environment that they do what the surrounding environment is doing. Yet we know that those weak personalities are the people who were the professional mourners at old-fashioned wakes or the happy drunks that were to be found wherever that celebration was taking place. But we all know that's not what the verse means -- it isn't referring to people like that.

Some of you might say, "Rejoice with those who are rejoicing, weep with those who are weeping? I've been at funerals and I've been a bit teary at funerals. It's not hard to feel some tears in your eyes when you go to a funeral -- especially when you meet the wife or the children or the parents at the graveside or the wake." I think most of us probably have felt some tendency to weep with those who weep at a time like that and yet aren't we shocked a little, deep down in our hearts, at the way we feel a kind of wave of relief as we get out of that grief stricken atmosphere?

We cry with them when we're shaking their hand and saying how sorry we are and how much we'll miss the loved one who has passed away, but isn't it a little shocking as you get into your car at the cemetery and as you put it into gear say "It's good to breathe fresh air again, good to get out of that grief stricken atmosphere." We would like to feel what real love feels: real love is vicarious and real love says, "I wish that had happened to me instead of them. I wish I had suffered the loss instead of them."

But we're a little concerned when we realize that's not our feeling. We've been a little teary, but actually we feel -- on the contrary -- kind of glad that it's them and not us. We feel kind of glad that they have to live with the loss and not us. And we're glad that we can kind of forget that, though they have to live with that empty chair, we don't because we only saw the person every other week or maybe at work and his place will soon be filled and it's so good to get back into our normal life that we thank God we've been unaffected by this tragedy.

That's why I think we, as usual, twist our language when we talk about empathy. We actually don't know the difference between sympathy and empathy. We say, "I can really empathize with you," but we don't really mean empathy. Empathy and sympathy both come from a Greek verb "pascho" meaning "to suffer"; but regarding sympathy, sym is "with", to suffer "with" another person while empathy is to suffer "in" another person. We like to think we're the sensitive 21st century people so we say, "I can really empathize with you", but we really don't suffer "in" them. We don't really project our suffering into them and suffer "in" them; we just suffer with them.

In other words when we say, "I can really empathize with you" we really mean "I had an experience

like this some years ago and I remember how I felt then so I know how you feel. I'm glad I'm not there now, but I can kind of know how you feel." We really still regard their sadness as something external to ourselves, don't we? And we still use it to click something in our little minds that turns us in on our own experience again and enables us to visit some part of our past life that we can kind of wallow around in once more. But it's just a little visit; it's not putting us into their spot. It's kind of feeling glad, "I'm glad that experience is past for me, sorry for you that you've got it, but I'm glad it's past for me. I remember what it was like, but I'm sure glad to get away from it."

That's why they still feel lonely -- that's why we all feel so lonely. The other little one still feels lonely because they actually know that's your attitude; they actually know that this is a kind of leprous condition that you wouldn't like to touch with a forty foot pole and that you're glad it's over for you. That's why we're all lonely, did you know that? That's why we're all lonely: because nobody actually ever empathizes with us, nobody actually does ever weep with us -- everybody is too busy with their own experience and getting away from our weeping.

If I could bring home to you, even on a purely selfish level, that sometimes that's why you feel lonely. You'll see the rest of us looking a little teary in our eyes, but deep, deep down you'll know "But it's not your dad that has died, is it?" And of course it's meant to be that when the bell tolls for him it really tolls for me also. "No man is an island", but we pretend we are islands and we make each other suffer that. It's the same with the lost job and with everything. That's why we feel so distant, that's why we feel it's so superficial this "weeping with those who weep" because they haven't really put themselves in our place and they don't really live with it as we have to live with it, day after day and month after month until the memory slowly fades. But if our weeping with those who weep is superficial, you know our rejoicing with those who rejoice is even more superficial. That absolutely lays bare the fact that we're interested primarily in ourselves because it is very difficult to be as glad for your friend that they have got the handsome bridegroom or that they got the good job as if you had got the handsome bridegroom or you had got the good the job, isn't it?

You rejoice and say, "Boy, that's great. Oh! I am so glad for you." But so often deep down in our hearts there's a little feeling, "I wish it had been me." It's often hard to be gladder for them that they're going on vacation than you would be glad if it were you yourself going on vacation. So you measure the two degrees of gladness because one is "Whoopee, yippee!" gladness and the other is "Oh, I'm glad for you". So it's hard to really rejoice with those who rejoice as if it was you that was experiencing it. You so often tend to look at somebody who is more attractive than you, more popular than you, more successful than you and feel a little touch of envy, a little touch of jealousy. It's hard to see somebody get a new car and really be gladder that they've got it than if you had got it and yet that's what it means, "rejoicing with those who rejoice."

Now the truth is that not only are we incapable of losing ourselves in joy at another's good fortune and incapable of putting ourselves into another person and "sorrowing with their sorrow", but the horrible truth is that from time to time we have seen ourselves turning it around; rejoicing with those who weep and weeping with those who rejoice. Wouldn't that be true? It's not a side of us that we like, but we have seen it. We've seen ourselves sometimes rejoicing with those who are brought to weeping and sometimes weeping with self-pity at those who are rejoicing.

Why is it like that? I mean that's the kind of personality that we have been brought up to admire,

isn't it? That kind of empathetic, flexible, flowing, open personality -- that's the kind of transparent individual that we all think we should be; the kind of person who rejoices with those who rejoice, weeps with those who weep. That's what we have been brought up to respect, that's what we've all tried to aim at as a person. Now, why are we not like that? I think the best expression of the answer is one by Saint Augustine who said, "Because we have stopped in ourselves." It's a funny phrase, but that's what he said in Latin, "because we have stopped in ourselves."

In other words your and my life, your and my personality is like a ranch of several thousand acres and you develop it and cultivate it and defend it. You defend it because who else is there to defend it? They're all busy on their own ranches, so you have to look after yours. So you defend and cultivate this ranch and everything that happens, you judge according to the way it affects your ranch, the ranch of self -- the ranch of your own personal, very personal, you. You judge storms and changes in weather by how it affects you, you judge changes in the economy by how it affects you and your ranch and that's all you are concerned about.

From time to time you might travel over to the edge of your property where your barbed wire fence is placed to keep people out and you might look over at the other man's ranch, but it's really just a visit and it's usually just to see if there is anything there that would be to your advantage or to your disadvantage. And then you scurry back to your ranch house which is right in the center of your property and from there you continue to view everything and everybody from that very narrow point of view. And usually you can see from there only your own concerns and the things you own yourself.

And loved ones that's the way most of us live: our attempts at rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep are only little excursions over to the edge of the property of self -- we're always looking at them from our side of the fence -- that's the way most us live. You may say, "That's the only way I can see living; I have to take care of myself, that's what I'm here to do. I have to look out and rejoice at the things that make me rejoice and those are usually the things that are to my own advantage. And I have to look out and weep, but the things that make me weep usually are the things that are to my disadvantage and the reason I can't rejoice with others that are rejoicing is I am too busy with my rejoicing and the reason I can't weep with those who weep is because I am too busy with my own weeping and if I'm not concerned about that who will be?"

God -- God will be -- that was the plan. The plan was that God would take care of you; would take care of your life, would take care of your future and the things that keep you awake at night -- he would take care of those things. Jesus put himself in your place and now spends all his time looking after you so that you could put yourself in our place and look after us. That's the way you and I are meant to live: we are meant to live not looking after ourselves -- that is what we put into God's hands. He takes care of that so that we can take care of all the people in his creation. We are intended to live like that and that's why he said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and

all these things shall be yours as well.” Matthew 6:25-33

So all of the assurances in this dear word tell us “cast your care upon the Lord, for he careth for you.” You don’t need to be so taken up with yourselves, so preoccupied with looking after yourselves; God has put you here in the world to transcend yourselves and to live above yourselves and to live freely and liberated in the delightful business of looking after the rest of us. That’s why you’re here, and if you do that he’ll take care of you. “Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:4-7

“No temptation (trial) has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation (trial) will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” I Corinthians 10:13

Those are all his promises, loved ones. And that’s why you and I are intended to live here taking care of each other and not of ourselves and if you say to me “the reason I take care of myself so much is that nobody else will do it”, maybe nobody else will do it but one; the dear Father will keep his word. He will not destroy his own nature just to let you die. He will not break his own promises just to let you die and victimize you. The truth is God will take care of you, loved ones, and you do not need to be pre-occupied and taken up with your own concerns. God has put you here to put yourself in my place. You’re to be concerned about me and I am to be concerned about you. I have to be more interested in whether you have a job than whether I have a job. You have to be more interested in whether I am happy rather than whether you are happy -- that’s it -- that’s the magnificent plan and when you go out on faith like that, it works.

I think a lot of you will say, “This sounds like paradise! It sounds right, but I am what Augustine said, I am ‘stopped in myself’ -- I can’t see my way out of this. I’ve been living looking after myself for years; I’ve trained myself to keep an eye out for myself. It’s hard not to worry when the bank account goes down, it’s hard not to be anxious when you don’t have a job. It’s hard not to be concerned when you’ve lost somebody -- I am doing by best but I can’t do it.” Yes, that’s right you can’t do it. Then you might say, “But I’ve got to try” and I would reply by saying no -- that’s your problem: it’s your trying that shows that you don’t believe what God has done for you in Jesus and the only way you’ll come into this life is by believing what God has done in Jesus.

I’ll repeat the verse to you again: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.” II Corinthians 5:14 All, all died. That’s you too, and so you are dead and if you’re in Christ, you’re a new creation. In other words that self of yours that is still concerned with its self, those feelings that go out to bluff the other person that you sympathize with them while all the time you’re thinking of yourself, all those feelings God put into his son and destroyed. Then he remade you as a beautiful flowing, flexible, altruistic personality. He has done that.

He has created you new and all you have to do is have faith in that. If you ask, “How do you have faith?” He died so that you might live no longer for yourself but for him who was raised and the way you show your faith is by living that way; by going out this morning and not once more thinking of yourself. And anytime you do find your mind thinking “What I am going to do” you immediately say “Lord, that’s your business, I am getting myself out of my hands and into your hands so it’s up to

you. You said I shouldn't be anxious every day so, alright Lord, I put it in your hands."

Loved ones it's the same with the worries that are driving us crazy -- those things you can't change; those dear sons or daughters that you can't change; those job situations that you can't change; would you stop that stupid business of worrying about them? That worry does nothing but show Satan that you think that that's reality. So stop. You know the worrying doesn't do anything, but you are worried because you think nobody is doing anything. Now, stop worrying and believe.

So the moment the thing comes into your mind "But that guy is not right" or the next day, "He is drunk", or the next day "They are the same bad tempered people they were the day before" or the next day you find the job situation is just as tangled as before -- don't worry. Instead say, "Lord God, I thank you that you solved this in Jesus, thank you. Rejoice in the Lord always. Lord even if the world thinks I am a dumb idiot, I am going to rejoice and I am going to believe you and I am going to take care of the rest of my friends here on earth and if I go down, okay, it's your will, I go down, but I am not going to go up through taking care of myself", loved ones that's it. And if you're sitting there a little skeptical and cynical— of course you realize you have to brush your teeth, you have to dress -- God won't do that, the angels won't come down to do those things, you take care of yourself in that way; but you know what I'm saying is instead of attending to all your own concerns about how to put yourself forward -- instead of that, trust God.

He'll put you as far forward as he wants; he'll fix the things that he thinks need to be fixed. The things that he doesn't fix, you thank God for them, really, thank God for them. Say "Lord, I thank you for the thing you did fix and I thank you for the thing you didn't fix. I thank you Father. I thank you that you see all things have been in accordance with your will at this present time. Otherwise, you would have changed it in my life. And now Lord I am putting this creature of self out of my hands; I am putting this miserable self into your hands Lord, to do with him what you want: live or die. And now I'll get on with looking after the rest of my dear friends here and will start rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. I am beginning to put myself in their place and walk in their moccasins."

That's it. That's real transcendence of our "self" and that's real infinite life and you can begin it at this moment because God has made you in Jesus to live like that and the way you are living at present means you are barking your shins constantly against the rock of reality. You can choose this moment.

Let us pray.

Dear God, we thank you that the kingdom of God is not a matter or talk but of power. We thank you Lord, that we are not here to discuss things, talk about things, think about things and rationalize our lives; we're here to act. This is the gospel: that we've been changed in a moment in Christ Jesus' death and resurrection. We were utterly and completely changed and we were made new creations to live for other people; to be a man for others; to be a woman for others; to live outside this narrow confine of our own little self. Lord thank you, thank you.

Father we hand over each personal worry now; each personal anxiety, each thing that we have regarded as our own -- as our very own. We realize we are not our own; we've been bought with a price and you bought us with that price and not only all our assets but all our liabilities; not only all our happiness but all our sadness. You have taken them all over. Lord, forgive us for holding onto them so long.

We give them now to you, and we intend now to look out -- not to ourselves and our own interests -- but for our colleagues at work and at school, to begin to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep and really meaning it because we regard their sadness as ours and their happiness as ours. Lord we thank you. Thank you for such a life, thank you for taking care of us so that we can live it, thank you.

Now, the Grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.