

On Weeping and Rejoicing and Looking for the Ring of Light

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Texts: Romans 12: 1-18

If there are passages to bookmark in your bible for this time, this would surely be one of them. There's been no dearth of online how-to commentary in recent days 'How to prepare and protect yourself,' and 'how to wash your hands,' for sure. By now, most of that seems so mid-March! That feels like a year, ago right? This past week, it was more 'how to work from home with small kids,' 'how to not annoy coworkers on Zoom,' or even how to get by while barbers and hair salons are shuttered! On that last count, my daughter Nellie watched a how-to-be-a-barber video on YouTube. I think she did a pretty good job, right? Beneath it all, of course, we are asking larger questions, about how to live, alone and together, and about how to be good neighbors through this devastating crisis. Enter Romans 12 and its wisdom and moral teaching drawn from Jesus and from Jewish sacred texts. Here we find clear instruction, exhortation even, about how to care for our souls and those of others and how to care for any community facing a crisis of disunity and separation.

First, verses 3-8. If I may paraphrase, be humble and know your sense of God-given purpose. In other words, we all have gifts and we can all be working to find our purpose for this moment. For some, our purposes are all too clear, healthcare and other essential workers, especially. We cannot thank you and pray for you all enough. You are an inspiration. But, our passage reminds us that we all have a purpose right now, we are all essential contributors in God's eyes. You too have spiritual gifts to bring to this moment! If it's to pray, pray. If it's to create beauty and art, then do that! If you can give, give! If you still aren't sure, then reach out and ask someone to help you find what God is calling you to during this time. If nothing else, rest in the knowledge that by staying home and doing what may feel like nothing you are doing something profoundly noble and lifesaving.

Next, verse 9. Through it all, cultivate a spirit of love! "Let love be genuine," Paul writes. A more literal translation is let love be "unhypocritical." As one biblical scholar noted about this line, "It is love alone that curbs self-assertion and [therefore] makes unity possible!" As we are separated, how can we let go of our own needs and fears a bit, our own selves, to make room for love! Something for us all to ponder, even on that next Zoom call. There's so much beautiful wisdom in this passage, each line could lead to its own sermon, but I want to hone in one more part that may be especially challenging right now.

Paul exhorts us to "Rejoice in hope!" Whew. And, in the next line he says to "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice!" Now, most of us can get the weeping part at a time like this. Reading articles or listening to heartbreaking stories whether from Italy or from ICU's or from those who have lost their jobs or who are facing danger on their jobs. If you haven't been able to weep yet, whether for yourself or others, I'd invite you start there. Go ahead and have a good cry. Weep with the tv if you have to. Weep with your with family or with your kids. Weep on your own if it's easier. And, weep with God for God is surely weeping with us right now. Trust me, it helps to be feeling all the feels through this!

But then, Paul says, rejoice with those who rejoice? At a time like this, it can start to feel like all rejoicing is on hold, can't it? It at least raises the question about can do we rejoice at a time of so much fear and anxiety and suffering.

I shared a poem called “A Few Words on the Soul” on a call this week and will post it on our blog as well. In it, Wislawa Szymborkas writes of the soul..

*Joy and sorrow
aren't two different feelings for it.*

*It attends us
only when the two are joined.*

*We can count on it
when we're sure of nothing
and curious about everything.*

...
*We need it
but apparently
it needs us
for some reason too.*

Friends, this is a moment when we need our souls, when we are returning to our souls and to their connection with God, no matter how long it's been, because we are needing deeper wisdom, deeper perspective, deeper wells of compassion, courage, beauty and resilience! Our souls need us now to be caring for them and the souls of others. When our bodies, minds and hearts fail us and are stretched to capacity, our ever-living souls can expand us and help us.

“Joy and sorrow aren’t two different feelings for our souls. Our souls attend to us only when the two are joined!” Think about it. Sorrow and joy, hand in hand. Grief and gratitude, sadness and gladness, suffering and love, all going hand in hand. It's not a question of waiting for one to follow the other, sorrow one moment, joy the next, of life as a rollercoaster of ups and downs, though many of us have been describing our experiences as such! If we follow the poet’s wisdom, the depths of sorrow we experience makes room in our souls and expands our ability to experience true joy. The deeper the sorrow, the more profound the joy. Hand in hand! Are we making room amidst our confusion for this soul-expanding truth?

Yes, there can be times when sorrow and grief eclipse all joy for a moment, but ... have you thought lately to what happens in an eclipse, especially a total solar eclipse, and why they are often so almost-mystically wonderful and captivating! I hadn’t thought of it until earlier this morning and haven’t checked my science here but I’m pretty sure of this. In solar eclipses, there is that ring around the dark moon, that hazy glorious ring of light that is the sun’s extended atmosphere. Do you remember what this ring is called?? It’s called the *corona*! (Pause)

In a moment of profound sorrow like this though, aren’t we seeing something similar? Immense suffering and social distancing, yes. Fear and despair almost great enough eclipse our hope, yes, and yet just as we are looking right at it, we also seeing a profoundly beautiful expansion of grace and gratitude and joy! This is a soul expanding moment for all of us! Go ahead and look for the ring of light and you can find it everywhere! As Mr. Rogers said, when we see scary things in the news, “look for the helpers!” Just look at them now! Nurses, doctors, caregivers, grocery store clerks, they are wearing

halos! Look at the sunrises, being seen through Boston skies, skies that are now 30% less polluted! Look at the kindness and tenderness and care in daily exchanges and artists like Yo-Yo Ma posting daily free concerts online! Or look at the restaurant I walked by yesterday in Porter Square, Sugar and Spice. There was a sign outside offering a free lunch to anyone on Sunday afternoons, no questions asked! This moment is shedding a miraculous light! In these ways and so many more our souls are being ever expanded to attend to sorrow and joy simultaneously.

One more poem before I close. Rabbi Jessica Minnen wrote of this moment:

*Yes, the space between us is scary.
It is odd and at odds,
an area unoccupied where all things exist.
But the space between us is also liminal,
a threshold between old and new.*

*And so, in this space anything is possible:
to grow without gathering,
to connect without congregating,
to create without convening.*

*Which means the space between is sacred.
Yes, the space between us is scary.
But scared and sacred are so close—
and we need to make space for both.*

Yes, scared and sacred are so close.

Grief and gratitude are so close.

Sorrow and joy are so close

And we need to make space for them all.

So, together, I wonder. Can we find a new sense of collective purpose in this struggle? What if at least part of our shared purpose for the weeks ahead is to let this experience expand our souls and make our love more genuine? In so doing so, as we move through it all, we make space for God, whose capacity for suffering and love is boundless, who always surrounds us and envelops with an extended atmosphere of love and care and light even through our darkest day and nights! If we feel we are stretched to the max, then by all means let yourselves fall apart for a time, fall a part in trust! And in that falling, know that even your surrender is a soul expanding gift. Surrender and weep! Surrender and rejoice! Surrender and hope for we are surrounded by God's love and joy and purposed even now. Amen.



