

There must be a gazillion reasons why human beings (uniquely) break down and have a good cry now and again. Some of us have our tear ducts so close to our eyes, that we can, as they say, cry at the drop of a hat. Others who don't like to wear their hearts on their sleeves, may not weep openly, so they do their best to keep their tears in check. For the most part, however crying isn't that hard for a lot of us. Our kids cry whenever their feelings are injured, when a parent leaves them with a sitter, or when they fall down and scrape a knee or bruise an elbow.

We cry during arguments, at the loss of a loved one, when watching a sappy movie, listening to a meaningful song, when a passing thought runs across our minds, when we've hit the lottery jackpot, when we're slapped with a lawsuit, when our children do us proud, when our daughter gets married, or because our daughter isn't married. We cry tears of revenge, seduction, escape and empathy; tears of pleasure and pain. The biblical history of tears shows us David crying at the death of Absalom, Abraham over the death of Sarah. Joseph bawled when meeting his brother Benjamin. Even Jesus, according to that famously short verse in John's gospel, wept.

Tears are always a goad to action, observes Tom Lutz in *Crying*, a groundbreaking book that details the history of tears from the 14th century B.C.E to the present day. The tears of public figures can spur people to pity or empathy, and then to action. Although tears were once seen as a sign of emotional instability in men, they are now considered to be proof that a particular man has feelings, and that he's strong enough to show deep emotion.

So what's this crying game all about? That's a good question as we observe Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent - the season of the church year that might appropriately be called "lack-ri-mose," meaning tearful or sorrowful. To start things off, in our first lesson this evening the prophet Joel issues a call for tears, for repentance. Divine judgment is on its way, and so God says through the prophet,

"return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." Although the people of Judah are terribly threatened by the coming of the day of the Lord, God offers them the opportunity to repent with fasting and weeping, and to return to communion with him.

Joel is convinced that these tears must be genuine. His God isn't interested in crocodile tears after all, nor does he desire a weeping that is designed to manipulate others. And the Lord is most certainly not looking for the kind of crying that is simply a biological event, a form of bodily secretion that may have the effect of evacuating ulcer-causing chemicals and proteins. No, God is interested in the type of weeping that accompanies an authentic change of heart.

In the middle of the genuine and authentic crying desired by God, the prophet Joel calls for a particular kind of weeping: That which is unpretentious, honest, and which leads us to repentance. To repent, as you may know, is to turn your life around and begin to walk in a new direction; it means to turn away from sin and idolatry, and to turn toward God's will and God's way. "Return to the LORD, your God," implores the prophet, "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Here's where the crying gets complex though: It is not only a sign of our sorrow over sin, but it can also be an expression of joy over God's goodness. We are invited to turn toward a gracious and forgiving God, not toward a vengeful and punishing Lord. God is "gracious," full of goodwill; "merciful," showing the love of a parent for their child; "slow to anger," waiting patiently for repentance; and full of "steadfast love," love which is grounded in God's promises to his people.

Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In it, the prodigal young man goes to a distant country, squanders his fortune in dissolute living, and then he "repents" - that is, he decides to turn himself around and return to his father. But Lloyd Ogilvie, a former chaplain of the United States Senate, points out that although this

story has become famous as the parable of the Prodigal Son, it really ought to be called "the parable of the Prodigal God!" After all, the father is God, and God is the real prodigal. God is the one who is extravagant, lavish, unrestrained and generous -in other words, "prodigal" - in his love.

God's forgiveness knows no boundaries. His joy knows no restraint. He runs to meet us, according to the parable. Puts his arms around us. Kisses us. Welcomes us home. The key thing to remember is that our crying - whether happy or sad - should result in changed behavior. The prophet Joel says, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing;" change your insides and not just your outsides; make sure your fasting and weeping and mourning are part of a new walk, not just a new talk. What the prophet Joel really hates is hypocrisy: People who say they are repenting, but then fail to turn their lives around.

Pastor and Author Barbara Brown Taylor argues that repentance is not complete until confession and pardon lead to "penance" - penance being a set of actions that allow community to be restored. "Just for a lark," she suggests, "imagine going to your pastor and confessing your rampant materialism, your devotion to things instead of people, and your isolation from the poor whom Jesus loved." Picture yourself confessing, with tears in your eyes, all those things that you have done to rip the fabric of your community.

She goes on to say, "Then imagine being forgiven and given your penance which might be: To select five of your favorite things - including perhaps your Bose radio and your new Louis Vuitton Purse - and to match them up with five people who you know would turn cartwheels to have them. Then on Saturday, put your lawn mower in your trunk, drive down to that transitional neighborhood where all the older folks live and offer to mow lawns for free until dark." Notice that none of this is standard punishment. None of it is designed to inflict pain on yourself. Instead, it is penance, which is for the purpose of showing that your life is

now turned around, and that you are devoted to repairing relationships and restoring community.

If you find yourself crying over your lost radio, just remember: When you weep in the process of true repentance, you're crying the tears of new life. And that is no joke. Tears have long been thought to bring the dead to life. Long before scandal prone celebrities, and religious leaders, turned on the tears in a desperate attempt to save their careers, people were making strong associations between crying and the renewal of life.

In the Egyptian story of the death of the god Osiris, the goddess Isis finds her brother Osiris dead and weeps over him. Her tears bring the dead god back to life. But most important for us are the words of our Bible that make a link between tears and new life: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy," says Psalm 126. "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy." And let's not forget the assurance of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" Plus the promises of what the Spirit will do in the lives of believers. At the Last Supper, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy."

Tears and new life - they are intrinsically linked to the promises that go along with our faith. During the season of our Lachrymose Lent, we can believe that if we return to our gracious God with all our heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning, then we will discover a fullness of life that we have never known before. If we turn our lives around and work hard for the restoration of our relationships with God, our neighbors, and our community, we'll know a joy that we never thought possible. Our tears will lead to resurrection life. And that' is definitely something we shouldn't be ashamed to cry about! Amen.