

## Community Teaching 02:

# Share Your Joys and Sorrows

### Intro:

- Last night I sat around the table with a few other families in our community for a meal.
- I was coming off an emotionally exhausting week, and I was still reeling.
- We sat down and gave thanks. The food was good, but simple, fare. The conversation was good, too, but ordinary.
- There was a good amount of laughter.
- And while dinner did not solve any of my problems, it did put me back in touch with *joy* — with the sense that I'm not alone, and life is good; with the miracle of ordinary life in God.
- It made me think of Dr. Robert Lustig's book *The Hacking of the American Mind*, which is about how modern corporations have capitalized on our brain's primal dopamine system, causing us to confuse pleasure with happiness; or in chemical language, dopamine with serotonin.
- Lustig argues that peak human happiness — the happiest humans ever are — is when we are sitting around a table, sharing a meal with people we love and are loved by.
- He says the only possible way to improve on this level of happiness is to eat the meal outdoors.

### Practice:

- We left off the last session with the table.
- Next up is sharing our joys and sorrows.
- Because when we come to the table, the challenge we face is: How do we not let our meal devolve into just dinner with friends?
- A lot of us are used to Millennial brunch culture, where we just kind of hang out.
- That's fine, but it's not Christian community.

- John Eldredge writes about three layers of conversation:
  1. The shallows — which is basically chitchat.
  2. The midlands — "how was your week?"
  3. And the depths — where you get under the surface.
- Our culture is so incredibly superficial, you can be at the table, and yet feel totally alone.
- How does the table become more than just another dinner party? How does it become a *communion* ... with God, *and with one another*?
- Well, one of my favorite hacks is just to go around the table and share the highs and lows of the week (in fact, that is our exercise for this coming week).
- And behind this exercise is a much larger framework from the life of Jesus himself ... where we regularly see him sharing his joys, and his sorrows, with his community.

**Turn:** Turn in your Bibles to Mark 14 ...

- I want to show you two stories from Jesus' life that showcase this framework, both from Mark 14.
- The first story takes place on the last night before Jesus' death.
- In context, Jesus and his apprentices are around the table for the Passover Meal, an annual Jewish Feast.
- We know it now as the first Lord's Supper.
- Listen to some of Jesus' final words to his followers ...

### **Mark 14v22-24:**

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.

- There's a lot going on here, but the short version is: Jesus is feasting with his community!
- And Jesus commands his followers to continue on this act of sharing a meal in his memory.
- In Luke's version, he says:
  - "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22v19).

- Meaning: *Keep* doing this.
- And *this* is *the* practice that Jesus left his disciples to organize their life, together, around.
- We call it the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist.
- But what we often miss in the modern church is that originally, not only was the Lord's Supper a full meal, but it was also done in a spirit of joy!
- As we said last time, they called it "the agape feast". It was like a weekly celebration!
- Meaning: Jesus designed our life together to be built around joy.

### Joys:

- In the story the Scriptures tell, God himself is the most joyful being in all the universe.
- The writer of Hebrews said Jesus was anointed "with the oil of joy" (Hebrews 1v9).
- Jesus himself said his *will* for his followers was "... that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15v11).
- In Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit, after love, the *next* fruit named is joy.
- Did you know, your brain literally has a "joy center," in the right orbital prefrontal cortex? It is arguably the only part of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow.
- Which is why, many elderly people are the happiest people you know. They've been growing their "joy center" for decades.
- The problem is, that while our brains are made to run on joy, they are damaged by sin, which means they are bent toward the negative.
- Neuroscientists tell us our brains have a 14:1 ratio for negative to positive thoughts ...
- One scientist I read said it's like our brains are flypaper for negativity and Teflon for positivity.
- Research says our thoughts are 80% negative and 95% repetitive. We just loop on the same fears, anxieties, hurts, and resentments.
- The famous Hungarian-American psychiatrist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called it "psychic entropy," (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*) the tendency of the mind to fall into chaos and negative rumination.
- Joy is not our default state.
- And this matters because "the joy of the Lord is your strength,"<sup>1</sup> as Nehemiah said.

- Which is more than a nice line; it's a key insight.
- The joy of Jesus is what fills our inner beings with the strength to live the way of Jesus.
- This is why Rick Howe said, "The pursuit of joy is a moral obligation." (*River of Delights*)
- Because without joy, we are vulnerable to evil:
  1. Low-joy people are prone to sin (one of Satan's primary strategies is deceiving us into believing that sin will make us happy).
  2. Low-joy relationships are prone to fracture.
  3. And low-joy communities are prone to fall apart. They rarely last.
- Joy binds us to each other and to God.
- My dad used to say, "The family that plays together, stays together." And the same is true for any community.
- By cultivating joyful attachment, we bind our hearts together in God.
- But there's a discipline to this ...
- The Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said it this way:
  - "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." (*Here and Now*)
- Our relationship to joy isn't passive, but active; we have a part to play.
- The Quaker professor Richard Foster called this "the discipline of celebration."
- Many people think of the disciplines as somber and serious.
- This may come as a pleasant surprise for you, that celebration is a discipline that can make you more joyful, and in doing so, more like Jesus.
- But in our culture of authenticity, it can feel wrong, almost like, morally wrong, to celebrate when we don't feel happy.
- But that's because we misunderstand how our brains are wired by God.
- We can't flip a switch and feel joy, but we *can* share highlights from the week, we can practice gratitude, we can cook a meal, we can throw a birthday party and affirm the person, we can look for excuses to celebrate ... and as we discipline ourselves *to* celebrate, God can use these acts to grow our brain's joy center — to make us more joyful like Jesus.

- And this is best done together ...

1. Because joy is a relational experience.

- The UCLA neuropsychologist Dr. Allan Schore actually argues that joy is what happens to your brain when you are happy to be with someone who is happy to be with you.
- He says, “Joy is connection.” (*The Development of the Unconscious Mind*)
- Think of that feeling when you see someone you know and love, you make eye contact, and their face lights up ... that feeling in your body is the purest form of joy.

- But also we do this together

2. Because our wider society is increasingly designed to make us terrified, outraged, and despairing!

- And while there are plenty of things to be angry about, there is also a multi-billion dollar *industry* designed to *stoke your anger*, fuel your fears, and rob you of joy ... because with a brain with a 14:1 negativity to positivity ratio, negativity is where the money is.
- In a culture like ours, “Joy is an act of defiance,” as Bono put it.
- We have to form micro-communities of defiant joy that resist the black hole of fear and anger.
- Little outposts of celebration and gratitude and laughter and happiness right in the middle of the war zone of modern life.
- *Only then* will we have the “strength” to live and love like Jesus.
- We do this by sharing our joys ...

**Seam:** But, secondly, sharing our sorrows.

**Hinge:**

- Story #2: Right after the first Lord’s Supper, Jesus and his disciples migrate from the upper room to Gethsemane.
- They end the meal by singing a hymn, the one time we see Jesus sing in the Gospels. Again, the discipline of celebration: He is choosing joy even while facing the cross.
- Then he goes to the Mount of Olives, and we read this ...

## Mark 14v32-34:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.”

- Notice: Jesus calls for his three closest brothers ... not even his community. Remember the four layers of community from the last session; the pain Jesus is about to feel is too intimate even for the 12; it's only for his closest friends ...
- He asks them to just be with him, through the most trying moment of his life.
- In this story, we learn from Jesus that we are to share not just the highs, but also the lows of life together.
- If Jesus needed a few friends to bear the weight of the cross, how much *more* do we need each other to bear our own crosses.

## Sorrows:

- We are not built to carry the weight of life, and our sin-damaged brains, alone.
- One of the first lines about humans in the Bible is, “It is not good for ... man to be alone,” (Genesis 2v18) and this was said *before* sin entered the picture.
- We're made not just to be together, but also, in the language of Paul's letter to the Galatians, to “Carry each other's burdens” (Galatians 6v2).
- We can't escape pain. Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16v33). But it is exponentially more bearable when it's shared.
- One of the most famous lines about church in the New Testament is from Hebrews 10:
  - “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10v24-25).
- People often point out the author's command to not give up meeting together ... this is good to hear.
- But what we often miss is what we are to do when we meet together — notice the author doesn't say to sing, or listen to a sermon, or study the Bible, or even pray — all good things.
- He says, “Encourage one another.”

- The reason meeting together regularly is so important is because, if your heart is anything like mine, we need encouragement constantly.
- I need another brain to comfort the “psychic entropy” of my own.
- Did you know: The Holy Spirit is called the “comforter” by Jesus. The Greek word is *paraklete*, a word meaning, “one who comes alongside.”
- That word “encourage” is *parakaleo* in Greek; it’s the verb form of the noun *paraklete*.
- Meaning, our role in community is similar to the Holy Spirit’s, we are to come alongside our brothers and sisters in their pain and comfort them, encourage them, support them, help them, and direct them, just like the Spirit of God.
- In fact, Paul commands us to do this all through his letters.
- Sometimes this is as simple as identifying who at the table had a hard week, and just taking a few minutes to encourage them, affirm the good you see in them, bless them ... very simple, but so helpful.

**Seam:** But — for this to happen, we have to share what’s really going on underneath the surface ...

- If we fake it ... “How are you?” “Good!” We will suffer alone.
- You can be around a table with a dozen people you know really well and still feel profoundly *alone* if you don’t actually share your heart.
- And this is what we see in the life of Jesus.

### **Wounds:**

- Joyful as he was, the prophet Isaiah said Jesus was “a man of sorrows who was no stranger to suffering.” (Isaiah 53v3 NCB)
- But look at what Jesus did in his darkest hour: He called for his friends! “Come, stay here with me while I pray.”
- One of the first things you learn if you study trauma is that *all* of us have some form of trauma, just to differing degrees.
- Because experts argue that trauma is not what happens to you, it’s how your body *processes* what happens to you.
- Which is why two people can go through the exact same experience, and one is shattered, while the other seems *strengthened* by it.

- And *the single most important factor* in whether painful events traumatize us or not is community.
- One of the landmark studies on trauma was done by the social psychologist James Pennebaker and his team at The University of Texas.
  - They wanted to know why it was that some people went through a traumatic experience and were devastated by it, they seem to never really recover, but others go through it and seem to not only to recover, but to really grow through it. A phenomenon scientists called “post-traumatic growth.”
  - They conducted this massive research study, and their hypothesis was that traumatic events that bore a social stigma were harder to recover from than those that elicit empathy.
  - They specifically looked at victims of sexual assault and people whose spouses committed suicide.
  - But after years of research, they concluded their hypothesis was totally wrong. There was virtually no correlation between the nature of the trauma and people’s ability to heal from it.
  - What they found, over and over again, was that if people went through a traumatic experience and had a close friend or community to walk with them through it, they usually came out okay.
- As the psychologist Robert Stolorow once put it, “Trauma is emotional pain that has yet to find a relational home.” (*Trauma and Human Existence*)
- The stakes are high: As scary as it is for many of us, we have to share our hearts with each other, share what’s *really* going on, in order to heal.

**Seam:** And not just to carry the weight of what has happened, but what *could* happen ...

### **Fears:**

- You can group all emotional pain into two simple categories: grief and fear.
- Grief is over what happened in the past; fear is the anticipation of what *could* happen in the future.
- And fear is harder to deal with because it’s unknown.
- You don’t *know* yet what the pain will be.



- Living with that uncertainty is brutal.
- One of the best ways to deal with anxiety is to share your fears with another person.
- The voice of Jesus is not the voice of fear, but of peace. But often, we need another person to help us sort through all the voices in our heads.
- For those of us who are more prone to anxiety, like myself, we have to do this *constantly*.

### Summary:

- So ...
- Sharing our joys.
- And sharing our sorrows.
- Is this what your table conversation is like? Or is it more superficial?
- This is how we become a community of love and depth in a culture of individualism and superficiality.

**Seam:** But this is scary for a lot of us ...

### Scary and slow:

- Especially if you've been wounded by a past experience in community ...
- Or if your early childhood years taught your body, on an unconscious level, that people aren't to be trusted, that intimacy is dangerous, that you have to wall off your heart to keep it protected ...
- Powerful forces inside us and outside us, going back to our earliest days, to our relationships with our parents, and their relationships *with their parents*, block our ability to receive love ... and to give love ...
- These forces work to keep us *alone*, keep us from sharing life with community.
- And many of us were not raised with the skills to even notice our own emotions, much less share with them with others in a healthy way. That's just not a tool we were handed by our families or early church experiences.
- Even if the first step for you is very small ... it's just to admit you had a rough day and not give any details ... take it one step at a time.
  - You can't bare all? Okay. What *can* you do?

- As you live in community, the more you share your heart, the more it will unblock your wounding ... and open it to healing.
- But you have to go beyond superficial conversation, and even beyond the safety of Bible study, as good as that is.
- We can meet with a small group every single week and share our insights from Scripture with each other for years, and yet never share our hearts, our pain ...
- And remember: The goal of Christian community isn't *just* to know and love God, it's also to know and love, and be known and loved by, each other. To become people *of* love.
- This does not happen overnight. It takes *years* to build this kind of community, to build trust with people where you feel safe enough *to* share your heart.

**Seam:** And the best way to do this, that I know, is simply to do life together around the table.

### **Jesus left us the table:**

- *This is the practice* that Jesus left us to organize our life together.
- Jesus did not leave us an architectural blueprint for a church building to worship in (in fact, church buildings did not exist for hundreds of years); he did not leave us a liturgy to follow, hence the wide spectrum of types of churches around the world.
- He left us the table.
- Professor Joseph Hellerman, writing about how unlikely it was that the early church survived the Roman Empire, said this:
  - “Christians had no temples, no sacrifices, no priesthods, no liturgy — just an informal weekly meeting in a local home where they broke bread and sang a hymn... This is hardly the stuff of a major world religion” (*When the Church Was a Family*).
- Yet Christians gathering weekly for a meal changed the world!
- Because this meal was *so much more* than dinner with friends.
- The bread was more than just bread, and the wine was more than just wine.
- It was a meal with Jesus.
- Are you hearing how simple this is?
  1. Share a regular meal with a set group of brothers and sisters.

2. Put Jesus at the center of it.

3. Share honestly in both the joys and the sorrows of life.

- If you do these three simple things, you will be *90% of the way* there.
- So this coming week, may you share more than a meal; may you open your hearts to each other, and share your joys and sorrows, as you share in the love of Jesus.

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#### Notes

1. Nehemiah 8v10