Preparing for today’s message, I came across an article that was published by Psychology Today on March 15, 2019. Entitled The Joy of Sadness, it was written by Sean Grover, L.C.S.W. Here is what it says:

Recently, a woman visited my psychotherapy office for a consultation and expressed concern that she was feeling sad since her mother passed away.

“When did she die?” I asked.

“About three months ago,” she said, “From cancer.“

“Isn’t it appropriate to feel sad?”

She sighed impatiently. “I don’t have time for this. Can you prescribe antidepressants?”

Sadly, sadness isn't valued very much these days. Pushed aside by the dazzling smiles and gleeful selfies that bombard us on social media, the message is clear: Happiness is for winners, sadness is for losers.

According to 10 studies on sadness reported by Research Digest, there is more value gained from honoring sadness than disowning it. The studies found that people who experience bouts of sadness benefit in many ways.

1. Sadness enhances empathy.

3. A good cry discharges toxins, relieves tension, and lowers stress.

4. Sadness induces greater patience.

5. Sadness awakens gratitude by reminding us of the fragility of life.

Many types of theater, art and music celebrate sadness. They touch us deeply because they give us permission to mourn, to grieve, to feel heartbroken, hurt, or disappointed. Such experiences deepen our humanity and often fuel our hunger for positive change. They cause us to assess our lives, our relationships and consider new choices.

I think we may be seeing these side effects of sadness in the events of recent weeks. And we are in week – what? – sixteen, seventeen…who even remembers… of the Coronavirus pandemic, and a lot of people are asking “How long, O Lord?” How long until I can return to work? How long until I’m allowed to go back to school? How long until I can visit my grandmother in her retirement home? How long until I can get a decent haircut? How long, O Lord?! Who would ever have guessed that the entire world would be singing the same song of lament at the same time?

But there’s more than just the pandemic. People everywhere are asking How long, O Lord, until all people are equal in the eyes of their neighbors. We know we are equal in your eyes, Lord, but we struggle to share your vision. I find myself humming the chorus of Brandon Heath’s song, Give Me Your Eyes:
Give me your eyes for just one second
Give me your eyes so I can see,
Everything that I keep missing,
Give your love for humanity.
Give me your arms for the broken-hearted
The ones that are far beyond my reach.
Give me Your heart for the ones forgotten.
Give me Your eyes so I can see. Yeah. Yeah.

We know the circumstances that are causing us to ask “How long, O Lord” today, but we don’t know for sure the circumstances of the writer of Psalm 13. It falls into a section of the Psalms titled, The Psalms of David. Some might find it hard to believe that the greatest king in the history of Israel would write a psalm of lament, but if you know David’s history, it’s easy to see that he could easily have written this psalm. I think it’s helpful that we don’t know the whole story behind this, what the exact cause of the lament would be. This is true as well as with several other songs of lament in the Bible. By not spelling out specifically what the writer is sad about, it helps us to see our own troubles, pain, and doubt in the words on the page.

No doubt each of us at times in our lives have cried out, “How long, O Lord?” And with that searching question we have found ourselves wrestling with our thoughts. Thoughts that question if God is even aware that we are suffering, that he cares for our plight, that he even hears us when we pray. These questions weigh on our hearts and minds, and the enemy uses this turmoil to enter our spirits.
We cry out to God to answer us! Give us light, Lord! If you do not answer my calling, then the enemy will surely win my soul! We are in the pit and fear there may never be a way out. But then we remember...

Just like the psalmist, we remember that the Lord we cry out to is an unfailing God. We have his promise to never leave nor forsake us, even in our darkest hours. Our hearts leap for joy at the thought of his continued love and care for us throughout our lives. As this joy wells up within us, we find ourselves bursting forth in songs of praise to our awesome God.

Although the psalmist did not have modern psychology to inform his response to the deep sadness he was feeling, still he was able to move from despair to joy. Expressing his fears and frustrations lifted a burden from his spirit allowing him to see more clearly that the God who had been with him since birth, was still present and caring for him with an unfailing love.

What happens to us if we do not find expression for our sadness? Sean Groves continues with this illustration in the same article:

A young man in a weekly group therapy, suffered from a multitude of nervous tics. He always seemed filled with worry or on the verge of tears. Yet each time he felt the urge to cry, he released a whirlwind of self-criticism and apology.

“Sorry! I’m too sensitive, I’m just being dramatic.”
Week after week, the group watched as he disowned his sadness. Finally, one of his fellow group members protested heatedly,

“I can’t stand how cruel you are to yourself,” she said. "You’re allowed to cry.”

He was shocked, “Why are you so angry with me?”

She explained, “You’re abusing someone I care about.”

It was the first time someone embraced his sensitivity and welcomed his tears. Throughout his childhood, his sadness was met with impatience and intolerance; his siblings mocked him, his parents responded with contempt. When he cried his father barked, “Go to your room and don’t come out until you’ve fixed your face!”

The negative voices of his family became his own inner critic that prevented him from honoring his sadness. He no longer needed his parents or siblings to shame him. He did that himself.

Over time with the support of weekly group therapy, the young man discovered it was okay to cry. It wasn’t shameful or unmanly. In fact, it made him more attractive and interesting and expanded his emotional intelligence. When sadness became a valid part of his experience, his nervous tics faded away. He no longer shied away from conflict or avoided expressing uncomfortable feelings. In fact, in honoring his sadness, he discovered a wellspring of strength.
Today we find ourselves as a society expressing a multitude of sadness. We are sad for those who have been lost to the Coronavirus. We are sad for the people out of work and businesses that may not return after the shutdown. We are sad for the economic impact of the Coronavirus, not only in the US but around the world. We are sad for the realization that people in our country have been held back from living their best life because of generations of repression. We are sad to learn that it’s not just our country that has let down members of its society, but that this is a worldwide issue.

*How long, O Lord?*! The psalmist shows us that we need to express this sadness. We need to lament, loud and long, what has been done to us and what we have done to others. We need to seek God’s face and ask Him to show us the way forward. It is only with God’s help that we will find a way forward, out of the sadness that engulfs us now to the joy that we find in His presence.

How many of us, though, are like the young man in the story told by Sean Groves? We fear expressing our sadness or anger. Maybe we are afraid that to speak our sadness or anger will somehow overwhelm us. Perhaps we are afraid that God can’t handle our negative feelings. So, we just continue in our sadness. As individuals and a society, we become stalled and progress toward joy is thwarted. To move toward joy, we must face and express what has been holding us back.

So, let us express our sadness to help us learn empathy for others. Let use our sadness to look at ourselves with new eyes. Let us use our sadness to grow greater patience with ourselves and others who are suffering. And when we have done so, let us awaken to gratitude by being reminded of the fragility of this life and the blessings God has bestowed upon us.
How long, O Lord? We come to you today asking how long because we know that you love us, we know that you understand us even more deeply than we understand ourselves. We know that you desire to lead us from sadness into joy. We are trusting in your grace and forgiveness to lead us out of sadness. We look to you for your special blessing of healing for us personally, for our church, and for our nation. We ask that you would make your people whole, so we no longer must ask, “How long?”. We ask all these things in the name of your son, Jesus. AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

June 28, 2020 Hatfield Church of the Brethren