

# REJOICE AND WEEP

I can think of no better one-sentence description of what it looks like to be a practical Christian than St. Paul's words "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Ro 12:15)." It seems simple, but it is a lifetime work. Over the past thirteen years at St. Hagop I think we have been growing into this. Do you also notice that more and more in our community, rather than just feeling bad for a person who is grieving, or feeling good for someone's joy, we step into their losses and joys to mourn and rejoice alongside them. I am thinking of Janet Davidian's daughter Jennifer who was taken by cancer last year. All of us felt bad, but many of us went further to step into her family's shoes, daring to imagine the unimaginable loss of a young mother to her young family. Stepping into that pain, we were then motivated to do anything we could do help-from flowers to funds to sending food. We also have occasions to step into people's joy at St. Hagop. When Eileen Barsamian Jennings had her special birthday last week, we didn't just send a card due to coronavirus restrictions. Ten cars with twenty people met in a parking lot in St. Pete and made a birthday parade by Eileen's home; showering her with gifts, balloons, and cheers. Thanks to Yn. Anna's leadership, we didn't just send Eileen happy emojis, we stepped in to rejoice with her at a time when-Eileen tells us-she really needed it.

The difference between sending emojis and actually stepping into a person's grief and joy is the difference between sympathy and empathy, and the difference that makes us into more mature Christians. Sympathy is a good start. Your heart feels sad or happy for someone; but it is not supposed to stop there. Empathy goes further, entering into another person's feelings, trying to understand where they are coming from, and feeling their grief or joy as your own. Empathy in this sense has deep biblical roots and is centered in Christ. It forms the heart of Bishop Daniel's vision for our Diocese, that all Christians are members of the same body, so as Paul again says, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it."-1Co 12:26

Learning to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep is something that I too am challenged to grow into. It seems easy on paper for a priest to be empathetic; heck isn't that what priests are for! But when everyone comes to you with their suffering and sorrows, and everyone comes to you with their joys-there is a temptation to get overwhelmed and calloused and just offer sympathy not empathy. There is temptation for me not to step into someone's loss or joy, because they might not appreciate it, because I've never seen them before their time of need and may never again, or just because I am too exhausted to be empathetic. But truly, where we end, God begins. If I can ask God for the empathy I lack to step into a person's sorrow or joy, I am nearly always blessed by it. I'm both personally blessed by God's love moving through me, and the church is often blessed with a new member who felt the body of Christ rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.

So we all have a challenge before us to continue to deepen our empathy for those within our church, but we also are challenged to broaden our empathy to those beyond the walls of this church. This, I implore you, is the way that an Armenian Christian is asked to respond to the many occasions for weeping that surround us today; be it the coronavirus, be it the killing of George Floyd and enduring racism in our country, or be it another police officer killed in the line of duty. It is hard to have empathy for all this because it is overwhelming. In today's media, left and right, you can find tragedy and cause for weeping, all day and all night.

But if we can keep our hearts and minds open for empathy, we will be blessed and God glorified. If we can listen to those protesting against racism, really listen, we might find that we don't just feel bad that another black person was killed unjustly, we might start to realize that their pain is our pain. After all, we Armenians for centuries were second-class citizens, persecuted, lynched at the whim of Ottoman authorities, just as blacks were for centuries second-class citizens, persecuted and lynched by American authorities. We might see that the modern Turkish state was founded-in part-on stolen property and assets of its Armenian, Greek, Assyrian and Kurdish citizens, just like the United States was founded-in part-on stolen people and their stolen labor as slaves. Does this make Armenians or blacks permanent victims or beyond reproach? Of course not, it simply recognizes the deep wounds of history which still haunt in the present. As the brilliant Southern writer William Faulkner put it, "The past is not dead. Actually, it's not even past."

So let's open our hearts if we can. If you can't, do what I do and ask God to open your heart to be with others in their joy and sorrows. Let's keep practicing this in deeper ways for each other at St. Hagop, and let's extend our empathy beyond the four walls of this church. For in doing so, we are paying forward all of those non-Armenians who have listened to our pain and have helped us right our injustices. Let us not be only takers of empathy, but also givers. For then the entire world will know that the descendants of the first Christian nation are also the first Christians to "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." Walking a mile in their shoes, and following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, now and always; amen.