

‘Permission to feel’ . . . Those 3 words grabbed me while reading Peter Scazzero’s book ‘The Emotionally Healthy Church’. When was the last time you and I gave ourselves permission to feel . . . and not just when we are alone . . . but in the middle of a church service?

At the past Christian Musicians Summit in Seattle (Nov 08) I was asked to share one of my most known songs as part of a songwriter’s circle on the last evening. It made sense why I was asked to sing ‘Come now is the time to worship’. The other songwriters were singing their most loved songs and sharing the story behind them. It was a real delight to hear Kathryn Scott sing ‘Hungry’ and Andy Park sing ‘In the secret’ among other wonderful songs that were shared. But I was struggling with the thought of singing ‘Come’ one more time. It’s not that I don’t still love singing that song; I actually do (though I probably prefer singing it in other languages now to increase the challenge!). What I was sensing was a number of grieving people at the event who had yet to find their voice – because their voice was one of sadness and pain. My pastoral heart picked up their presence; even in the large crowd. And it wasn’t just the people present. My good friend and long time worship leader Cindy Rethmeier from California was up to join us to hang out behind the scenes, and she had just got word that their house was on evacuation alert from the fires ravaging Southern California. So while we were enjoying our weekend in Seattle, her husband was quickly trying to remove all the valuables from their home of 20 years in Yorba Linda and hose down the roof and the house to stop stray embers from igniting their house. A home close to theirs had already burst into flame!

And so instead of just singing ‘Come, now is the time to worship’, with the help of Kathryn Scott, we sang a medley of ‘Come’ and ‘Psalm 13 (How Long O Lord)’. We blended a big anthem of invitation with a sad song of lament . . . and it seemed to work!

Sometimes we feel forgotten by God . . . and it’s OK to say it . . . to even sing it in the middle of a church service. For centuries, the church used the Psalter as its songbook. For some reason us moderns seem to have become afraid of the psalms . . . maybe because they are so earthy . . . and so full of raw human emotion. We need to give our congregations permission to feel. We need to give ourselves as worship leaders and musicians release to express our emotions in our music.

Has it ever struck you as strange that when people begin crying their automatic reaction is to apologize? Jesus wept and he didn’t apologize – he wasn’t doing anything wrong!

I know in times of tragedy and crisis, it’s especially important that we express what’s going on in our hearts. To try and deny what we are feeling is the route that many modern believers have taken; maybe without realizing it strays from the biblical pattern laid out for us in the psalms and in the life of Jesus. In fact denial is one of the main ways that the world deals with loss and grief. There’s another ‘d’ word that describes the way the world deals with loss – distraction! Between denial and distraction you pretty much have the world’s way of coping with loss, disappointment and grief summed up. (The entertainment and travel industries are built on coping through escaping) But we are not called to take our cues from the world. We are saved and freed to live the life that Jesus

showed us to live . . . and one of the many things I love about Jesus is that he was completely free to feel!

Maybe this is a challenge because by being musicians we have embraced the discipline of performing and sometimes that means disregarding our feelings to keep our performance intact and moving along! Maybe it's because we have brought cameras and recording devices into our gatherings . . . and as a result we have encouraged a performance that at times is not honest. (I love powerful anointed live recordings as much as everyone!)

Whatever the reason for shying away from the 'darker' emotions in worship, we need to enlarge our view of what it means to worship to include all of the emotions found in the psalms and in the example that Jesus gave us in his life and death.

There is a line in 'Come' that invites us to 'come as we are'. I actually wrote 'Come' in one of the blackest seasons of my life just after a big failure with a ministry project and finding out that our first son was mentally handicapped. That's why I didn't write the song like this:

Come, now is the time to worship
Come, now is the time to bring Him praise
Come, bring Him your best and worship
Come, bring Him your all in glorious praise
Come

Worship is not always about bringing God our best and brightest. Sometimes it's about bringing God our pain and grief. Sometimes it's coming just the way we are!

God wants to give us more than permission to feel – he wants to step into the middle of our feelings and be present with us; even in our suffering . . . even in the middle of our emotions. So let the tears flow . . . let the laments be sung . . . and don't even think about apologizing!

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