

Year C\*Lent 5\*2010\*Our Mouth Was Filled With Laughter  
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Rough Draft

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.  
Then they said among the nations, \*  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”  
The Lord has done great things for us, \*  
and we are glad indeed.  
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, \*  
like the watercourses of the Negev.  
(Psalm 126)

My friends, I want to share with you some about our family trip to Palm Springs last week. It turned out to be an important time, more than a vacation, for me. Many of you know I am not only a tennis fan but a tennis fanatic. I love to play it. I love to watch it. And I particularly love to watch the greatest player ever to pick up a tennis racket, Roger Federer.

To show you the extent of my fanaticism, I taped all of Roger's. . . we're on a first name basis. . . matches in a recent tournament called the Australian Open. Seven matches. I got up every morning at 3 AM to watch the matches live and to tape them. Then I watched the whole series of seven matches twice. I have a generous friend who said to me, “Rick, we love this compulsive side of you.”

Well as a 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary gift to. . . Beth?. . . Beth, Alex, Megan , and I went to a very big tournament in Palm Spring called the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Center. All the greats were there:  
Raphael Nadal,  
Andy Murray,  
Novak Djokavic,  
Andy Roddick,  
and. . . .*Be still my heart* . . . Roger Federer!

We'd been there three days. I'd seen Murray, Djokavic, Nadal, and many other great players, but not the greatest. So I arrive on the third day. The rest of the

family is sleeping in. I notice a very good player, Nicolai Davydenko, is playing on the main practice court so I go down to watch him.

He's great.

I find a spot on the very corner of the bleachers and I enjoy Nicolai. As his session is coming to a close I look up and there across a couple of courts is Roger Federer. As Davydenko is packing up his gear Roger hurries across one court and comes to mine. He says "Hi" to Nicolai then walks to my side of the court. It's like he's walking right up to me. Besides a nearby television cameraman I am the closest human being to Roger Federer. Nothing is between us but a low fence. And he starts to hit tennis balls.

Now I have to stop here. This is important. If you have ever seen anything both beautiful and awesome; the ocean in a storm, the wind shaking the forests, the birth of a child, you know what you feel like inside.

Your body vibrates.

Some mixture of joy, awe, and pleasure gets released.

You suddenly sense the goodness of things and your connection to them all.

I am a little embarrassed to admit, that's what happened to me.

Quite simply I was suddenly blessed as I watched the fluid, graceful, movements of a great athlete.

But that was just the first wonderful thing.

I texted Megan. Megan was my main texting companion whenever we would find a great player.

"We're watching Blake" she would text, or, "Bagdhati's on court 12".

In this case I just texted, "Federer!"

Megan responded, "We're on our way!"

Then the second wonderful thing happened. People we're crowding around of course. The bleachers we full. The aisles were packed. The approaches to the aisles were jammed. People were standing four deep at the fences just to get a peek. When Alex, Megan, and Beth arrived I told them, "Say you have a seat and walk through the crowd. . . and they did. I didn't care what people thought.

The television camera had created some excellent spaces people didn't see or didn't want to fight to get to but all three braved the scowls and hurumphs of lesser fans and made it to "My Corner of the Bleachers." You need to know the in this sermon text "My Corner of the Bleachers" is capitalized. Because that's how

it felt. I belonged there, watching Roger Federer for two whole hours. I was home. And now my family was with me not ten feet at times from my hero.

Then the most important thing happened. Suddenly I realized that I was warm. The sun was bathing us all, my family, Roger, the other fans, the other players. Anyone who has spent the winter here in the high country knows how that must have felt all by itself. It was beautiful. I was warm and grateful to be warm. But the warmth of the sun on my skin matched some inner warmth that was filling me. It was a warmth fueled by joy, awe, and pleasure all rolled into one moment.

In his Journal the great Anglican Priest John Wesley wrote,  
I went to a meeting I didn't really want to go to. Someone was reading Luther's Epistle to the Romans. Then about quarter to nine, at that point in time. . . I felt my heart strangely warmed. From then on, I just couldn't hold it in any longer. My urge to tell the world kept on growing stronger. So I did. . . I traveled on horseback as far and as wide as I could, letting people know. . . so that their hearts to might feel strangely warmed.

When the Lord warms our hearts it is time and event specific.  
It's on a Wednesday morning in the corner of the bleachers.  
It is usually a surprise.  
And it is a spiritual consolation meant to be enjoyed and savored.  
I realized, without a doubt, the moment was intensified because my wife and my children were there,  
we were enjoying each other,  
we were sharing amazement, sunshine, and joy.

That's when the moment became transcendent.  
that's when I knew it was about God.  
And I was deeply grateful.  
I still am.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.

That's how the Psalm begins.  
That describes my experience.

There was more moments just like that one. It seemed like the week went from blessing to blessing, filled me to the brim until I was overflowing.

Then it was time to go and three things happened.  
Just like the psalm.

Those who sowed with tears \*  
will reap with songs of joy.

Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, \*  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

The psalm places joy in relationship to tears, laughter with weeping, feasting with hard labor.

My last night at the Indian Wells Tennis center Alex, my son, and I went to watch a night match. A young, 17 year-old up-and-comer, Ryan Harrison, was playing and eventually defeated an old savvy veteran, Taylor Dent. Alex and I left early and when we reached the tunnel under the road which lead out of the facility the place was mostly empty even though the match was still on. An African-American man walked up to us and said, “I have an unorthodox question for you gentlemen. Would either of you mind giving me your ticket if you are leaving for the evening?”

Two things happened simultaneously. My mind went into hyper-drive and began weighing the risk and reward of handing my used ticket to someone I didn't know. Was it ethical?

Could I be somehow discovered if it's holder did something wrong?

Why does this man want to watch tennis?

I am not proud of this.

But that's what I did.

At the same moment Alex handed the man his ticket and said, “No problem”, and off we all went.

On our last day in Palm Springs, on the way to the airport, on a little dry hill, beside an empty dusty road, under the bright sun, there were five or six emergency vehicles parked with lights flashing. A nice looking Mercedes Benz sat on top of the hill with the driver's side door open. A rescue worker was working urgently to start the heart of a large, white man, lying naked on a blue tarp that had been spread on the ground. We prayed for the man and the rescue workers as we drove on to the airport.

In the airport a very unkempt older man in a wheelchair was angrily insisting that the airline should get him where he wanted to go. The man smelled. He smelled bad. It was the rank odor of the street. Clothes lived in and sweated in for weeks, maybe months. It reminded me of the smell of the street folks I used to work with

in Denver. I thought, there is no way I can sit next to this man all the way to Charlotte. I wasn't proud of that thought either.

Those who sow with tears.  
Those who go out weeping.

Somehow those three men, the young man at the tennis center,  
the dying man on the hill,  
the smelly man at the airport,  
were also part of the blessing.

I am a joyous, fulfilled, delighted, content man.  
I am a fearful, mortal, selfish man.  
I must be willing to work with both,  
accept both,  
learn from both,  
offer both to the Lord for healing and resurrection.

Somehow the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection encompasses  
all of who we are,  
accepts all we are,  
works with all that we are,  
and, finally, raises all that we are from the dead, on the last day.

There is no joy, however small, he cannot invade and fill with warmth.  
There is no darkness he cannot redeem by his love.

This is God's great work.  
This is our great joy.  
This is what we will be celebrating a week from today in the passion, death, and  
resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.