

“God Weeps” – November 1, 2015 – John 11

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The shedding of tears is a natural part of being human. One of the first things we do after we are born is to greet the world with loud wailing as we suck air into our lungs for the very first time. And crying often greets our final exhalation of breath, when upon the moment of our death those we leave behind express their feelings of loss and grief through their tears.

Babies turn crying into an art form. As infants we cried when we were hungry, we cried when our diapers needed changing, and we cried when we wanted the attention of our loved ones. We learned early on that crying often elicited the responses we desired, and tears and tantrums became a mechanism of control. Then as we progressed into early childhood, many of us were conditioned out of the manipulative use of tears, and crying was reserved for strong emotional responses of happiness, fear, and sadness.

A little girl cries as a result of falling and skinning her knee on the sidewalk. A little boy cries when his favorite toy breaks. A child burst into tears when frightened by a scary story told at a Halloween party. Tears of joy accompany a surprise announcement of a trip to the amusement park or learning that a favorite relative is coming for a visit. Tears of disappointment result when a best friend’s family is moving to a new city.

Crying doesn’t stop when we become adults, though some grown-ups are embarrassed or ashamed to cry, believing that tears are a sign of weakness. We can cry in response to the beauty of artwork, or poetry, or music. We cry after reading a particularly moving book or watching a movie. Though I hate to admit it, sometimes I’ll find myself teary-eyed over a television commercial. Apparently the marketing departments know what strings to pull during prime time!

And of course we cry at times of distress and sadness. The death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a terminal illness often results in tears of shock and grief. Sometimes we cry when we experience feelings of regret. We look back over our lives and imagine all the ways our lives could have turned out differently. The “what-ifs” and the “might-have-beens” weigh heavily upon our souls. Life didn’t turn out quite the way we had expected, and the tears of frustration or loneliness dampen our pillows at night.

Lutheran Pastor Phyllis Kersten points out that weddings are a natural occasion for tears. Tears of happiness and anticipation flow for the young couple, just beginning their journey together. The parents cry bittersweet tears over the changes that weddings signify – the “loss” of a son or daughter – especially when the marriage partner seems less than ideal. For some people, weddings trigger all sorts of tearful responses. Memories of one’s own wedding, for better or for worse. Reminders of the struggles one is having in one’s own marriage. Or

bringing to mind the absent partner of one who has suffered the death of a spouse or for a marriage that ended in divorce. (from *Christian Century*, 10/20/09, p. 21)

Funerals also are occasions for crying. Whether for an unexpected or tragic death, or for one following a full life, funerals are difficult for us. Even when we are somewhat removed from knowing the deceased, funerals remind us of our own mortality. For whatever reason, our brains seem to be unable to fathom our own death. We seem to be programmed in such a way, that even though we logically know that someday we are going to die, it doesn't ever really fully sink in. But there are moments when it becomes real to us. At a funeral, or as we watch someone we love succumb to illness or simply old age, death becomes real.

A dear friend of mine had a very aggressive and rare form of breast cancer. Prior to her own death, she attended the funeral of a friend's father. She really didn't want to go. She said it was because she doesn't like to cry in public. But that was only part of it. As we talked more, she admitted that her bigger fear was having to face the specter of her own death. This was the first funeral she had attended since her cancer diagnosis. Death became more real to her.

Our gospel lesson from John takes us graveside to the funeral of Lazarus, a man who was much beloved by his sisters Mary and Martha. The tears flow freely as the mourners surround the tomb, but especially poignant are the reactions of the two sisters. Martha, the strong one, trying to hold back her emotions and remain calm throughout. Mary, freely weeping at the feet of Jesus, who had just arrived, and crying out to him, "Where have you been? If you had gotten here sooner, my brother would not have died."

Jesus looked at the crowd of people gathered around, looked down at the sobbing Mary curled on the ground at his feet, looked over at Martha whose tears quietly rolled her face, and Jesus wept. Jesus began to cry. Jesus was overcome with emotion. His friend Lazarus was dead. The two sisters, also his friends, were drowning in their great loss. And so Jesus began to cry.

Some in the crowd saw his tears and commented on how much loved his friend Lazarus. But others whispered, "Isn't this the fellow who healed the blind man? Surely if he can heal blindness, he could have prevented this one from dying." Where was the miracle? Where was the healing? How can you heal one and not another? Fervent prayers for relief and release, for healing and restoration. Why do some requests seem to go unheard, unanswered.

There are two points I want to make about this passage from John's gospel. The first has to do with why Jesus wept and the second is about what happened next, the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus began crying, he was experiencing more than just grief. The text is translated that he was greatly moved in spirit. The actual Greek idiom refers to a gut wrenching type of

agony mixed in with anger. This wasn't just a gentle sobbing; this was a powerful display of raw, tortured emotion.

Jesus knew what he was going to do. In fact he had delayed coming when he first received the message about Lazarus from the sisters. He had wanted to make sure that Lazarus was really dead before he came. Because the act of raising Lazarus was to show the fullness of God's glory.

So why the emotional outburst? If he knew he was going to raise Lazarus, why cry? Because Jesus is human. But he is also God. Because Jesus is God with us. He is God incarnate. We do not have a God that resides quietly "out there" somewhere, observing us from a distance. We have a God that comes right into the mix of pain and turmoil and agony. Jesus weeps because creation suffers. God's creatures suffer, and God suffers with us. Jesus weeps because illness and weakness and death cause such pain for humans. Jesus weeps because God weeps with us. We don't have a God who silently watches from the edges. We have a God who gets down and dirty into the muck and heartache of life and journeys alongside of us.

But that's not the end of it. And this is my second point. Jesus weeps, but Jesus also acts. Death does not thwart him. Three days of the body's decomposition does not deter him. He commands the stone to be rolled away, and he calls out to the body inside, "Lazarus come out." And the dead man rises, still enveloped in his grave clothes, and he comes out, living and breathing once again.

This final act of God's glory foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection. The grave will not hold claim on him either. He defeated death once and for all. Through Jesus Christ we receive the promise of eternal life. In him there is hope and life for eternity.

Yes, while we live out our lives on this earth, the shadow of death is ever before us. We are mortal creatures. Our bodies are frail and can succumb to violence and illness and yes, even to self-destruction. Our world is still full of darkness and pain. We have the promise of a bright future, but we still have the agony of living in this oftentimes harsh and painful world.

Sometimes we blame God for our pain. Mary and Martha did the same thing. They both said that had Jesus just shown up a few days earlier, Lazarus would not have died. In the midst of our blaming, we may forget to recognize that Jesus is standing right there next to us, weeping as we weep in that very graveyard. God will not fix every little thing that is wrong in our world. That just is not the way this world works. But God will stand with us in our darkness and our loneliness, and shed tears alongside us.

This is All Saints Day in the church. It is a time to remember all those who have died before us. Whether just recently, in the last several years, or generations ago, All Saints Day points us to those who have passed on into glory. It is a time of remembrance. It is a time of bittersweet celebration. And it is a time of hope.

As we remember the saints who hold meaning for us, we remember the good along with the bad. The word saint certainly should not imply perfection. Those who have passed on before us were just as flawed as we are. But they paved the way for us. They loved us, nurtured us, and handed down their faith to us, and they pointed us in the direction of God – sometimes by their words, but more often through their actions. What to do, what not to do. They are all a part of the great host who push us forward and encourage us on this journey of faith.

We too can count ourselves as part of that great host. In our baptism we died to the old life and were born again into God's family. We were raised from the waters of baptism into a life of promise. We were claimed by God and sealed by the Holy Spirit. We have a kinship with all in the faith – past, present and future. We are part of the Communion of Saints. We affirm this every time we say the Apostle's Creed together. We needn't look at death as daunting or frightening. Death is not an ending, but merely a transition into eternity.

But we're not there yet. We still have to live in this world. A world in which God's kingdom has broken in, but a world where pain and suffering still have a devastating impact. A world of illness, violence, struggle, and loneliness. A world where we at times find ourselves crying out to God in anguish, Where are you? But if we take a moment to silence ourselves, to take in a deep breath, in the stillness of that moment, we will hear the sobs of one who loves us more than we could ever dream or imagine. One who feels our pain more deeply than we can feel it ourselves. One who cries with us in our moment of distress, but he doesn't stop there. For he is also one who offers promise for a bright eternity.