

“Tears”

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

October 28, 2018

Second Presbyterian Church

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In many cultures throughout the world, there is a tradition of hiring or inviting people to publically mourn for a loved one who has died. These people may know the deceased or not, but they are present after death and throughout the mourning period. They can be part of a funeral procession or at a burial. They cry and weep and wail, conveying not only the feelings of the family of the deceased, but also to alert those nearby that there has been a death and that the community should come to comfort and support those who are grieving.

People from cultures that do not have this tradition often find it strange, perhaps even unnecessary or annoying. If you attended a funeral here at Second and there were people who had gathered at the back of the sanctuary and wailed throughout the entire service, it would probably seem very odd and disrespectful.

But these “professional mourners” as you might refer to them also help those who are grieving know that they aren’t alone and that it is perfectly acceptable and expected that they would want to wail and weep. They join in the grief so that those who needed to grieve out loud wouldn’t be the only ones.

Think about this: How many funerals or memorial services have you attended where the children or parents or partners of the person who has died are trying so hard to “keep the stiff upper lip” and just get through the service without breaking down? And how we then feel embarrassed for the person who just can’t stop crying?

In our culture, we don’t usually embrace “outbursts” of extreme and powerful emotions in public. If we see someone who is elated and laughing hysterically, we glance around at each other to convey, “Who is this nutjob and why are they acting so weird?” If we see someone who is overcome with grief at the hospital because they have just learned that their child has died, we try to avoid making eye contact and pretend we don’t notice, trying to convince ourselves that all they need is privacy and we shouldn’t do anything.

What if instead of reacting in those ways, we engaged with the people we see who are having strong emotional reactions? What if went up to the supposed “nutjob” and asked what they were so thrilled by and if we can join them in their excitement? What if we went up to the childless parent and sat with them, cried with them, let them know that we mourn for their loss as well? What if we joined with people in their rejoicing and their sorrow, not only letting them know that they are not alone, but making it clear that showing and sharing emotion is beneficial to the community?

This is one of the most important lessons that we can take away from story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave. This story is probably familiar to people, and for some it sticks in their head because it contains the shortest verse in the Bible. Verse 35: Jesus wept. He wept. He wept along with Mary and Martha, and with the community of a family that he love that had just suffered a loss.

And notice that it doesn't simply say that "Jesus cried". It says that he was greatly disturbed in spirit and moved. This wasn't a stoic tear running down his cheek and staying reserved. Because weeping is public, loud, impossible to ignore. It is wailing and being unable to catch your breath. It is crying so long and so loud that your eyes run out of tears and your voice disappears. It is a face contorted until it can't be recognized and a body so drained that the only thing you can do is curl up into a ball on the floor.

It is Jesus' response to the loss of his friend, but it is more than that. In retrospect, we know that Lazarus was raised from the dead. And in that moment, Jesus knew that this could be done. So then why was he deeply moved and disturbed in his spirit?

Cynthia Jarvis explains, saying, "It is Mary's grief that renders God's Word silent. Jesus weeps, his tears constituting the only conscionable theological response we often can make when called to the side of the grieving. To another's lament and longing for a reason from on high, we speak of the God who weeps with us. We know this, we say, because in his weeping—over Jerusalem, at Lazarus' tomb, and in the Garden of Gethsemane—Jesus reveals the pathos of a powerless almighty God."

Jesus wept with Mary and Martha because they were experiencing a sorrow unlike any other, an experience that changes us completely, and a loss that turns the world into something that we no longer understand.

I know many of you can relate to that type of sorrow, that instant where your life flipped upside down and you had no way of knowing how to put it right side up again. For me, it happened 9 ½ years ago when my dad died suddenly of a brain aneurysm.

One minute I was a student in my first year of seminary at Princeton, sitting in my friend's room working on Greek homework. The next minute my mom was on the phone telling me that my sister had found my dad unconscious and that he was in the hospital on life support.

When he died 3 days later, my brother and sister and I were all with him. I held onto his hand for a long time, because I knew that the second I let go my life wasn't ever going to be the same. And it wasn't. I left the room and walked down the hall to a window and looked out at a world that no longer made any sense to me.

I felt like I had been dropped onto another planet that looked almost identical to my own but was just off in some way that I couldn't figure out. I didn't know how to exist in a world where my dad didn't. One day I could talk to him, hear his voice, hold his hand, and the next I couldn't. It just didn't make any sense.

And it still doesn't. But I have, very slowly, learned how to exist in the world without my dad in it. I never thought it would happen, and it definitely didn't happen overnight, but eventually I learned how. That doesn't mean that things went back to being the same, or that I'm the same as I was before he died, because they didn't and I'm not. I had to learn how to be a different version of myself.

Something happens to us when we grieve and mourn that makes us act or think in ways that we probably never have before. Like when my dad died, my family and I were all caught completely off guard. My sister and brother and I had all talked to him earlier that day, and then he was gone. And so when we were all suddenly planning a funeral together, our emotions were running really high.

One thing that happened was when we were deciding the flowers and what was going to be present near the casket during the service. My nephew, Gabe, was only 3 at the time, but one thing that he had bonded with my dad about was NASCAR racing. And so my brother had found a little racecar that they could put some flowers in for my nephew to put with the rest of the arrangements. It was sitting on a large desk chair in the bedroom where my brother was staying, and when I came over to the house, I sat down in the chair. I had seen the little car and knew what it was for, and so I pushed it to the back of the seat because I didn't see any other place to put it, and sat on the edge of the seat so I could use the desk.

Well, when my brother came in, he got really upset. I tried to point out that I wasn't actually sitting on it, that I had moved it, but he was still really upset. After he calmed down, he explained to me that he was so angry because he felt like I had disrespected Gabe and his relationship with his grandpa, Pappi as Gabe called him. And I started to understand.

My brother knew I loved my nephew and that I wasn't trying to be hurtful to him or my brother. But since Gabe was only 3, he probably wouldn't have any memories of my dad, and so, in that moment, it was very important for him to be able to connect with what had happened and honor his relationship with his Pappi.

After that, my brother, my big brother, who I looked up to and thought was larger than life, started to cry, and so we just held each other and cried. I don't think I had ever seen my brother cry before or since, but it happened because of the extreme grief that we were both experiencing and didn't know how to express.

In those moments, our actions don't make any sense, probably because we don't know how to act in this new and strange world that we live in. We are still ourselves, but we aren't. And when we have gone through that experience or seen someone else go through it, we struggle to understand what John saw in his revelation about the coming of the Kingdom of God.

We don't understand how there could possibly be a time where there is no longer pain and mourning, no more death or tears. The idea that John describes here is, in fact, one in which we have no reference for. The entire idea of death never happening again, and therefore no need to mourn or cry or feel pain, is something we can't imagine. It's like trying to imagine what it would be like to step outside of time or to never have existed at all. The concept of time and the understanding of our own existence are things that we can't imagine NOT happening.

Try it right now. Close your eyes and see if you can imagine a world where no one dies, where no one has to mourn over loss, where no one ever has a need to cry, where no one feels pain. Not a world where we are simply immune to the effects of these things experiences, but where they simply don't happen. Where there is no concept of pain and grief. It simply doesn't exist. This is the existence, the eternity that is waiting for us and our loved ones who have gone before us, the new heaven and the new earth that John saw.

Now I don't really know how to make sense of that idea, but I know that it brings me comfort. And so does the image of Christ mourning and weeping with those who are distraught. He met them in that moment, recognized their grief, and joined them there. He felt their sorrow and wept for them.

Victor McCracken describes it this way: "The God of the church, embodied in the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, is not unaffected by the suffering and loss of the world. Jesus looks upon the grieving of Mary, Martha, and the Jews with compassion and empathy. In

his weeping, Christ is not bowing to human nature, nor is he pained by the failure of the mourners to understand the nature of death. Jesus weeps for the death of Lazarus for the pain of those who loved him. The good news of this text is that in Christ God freely enters into suffering.”

Jesus was about to raise Lazarus from the grave and to show to everyone present the ultimate power of God to conquer death. But even with that knowledge he saw the importance of allowing the people there to feel what they were feeling. Because just like we know that those who have died live on eternally with God, we still need to be allowed to experience our loss in this time and place, to express our feelings and to honor and appreciate the people who are no longer with us.

We can have confidence in the resurrection and yet still mourn. Those tears are good for us, they are cathartic, and when others join with us in our sorrow, we know that we do not weep alone.

And so as we observe All Saints Day today, we remember those who have gone before us, those who have taught us and inspired us, those who raised us and loved us, those who showed us the examples of Christ’s love and compassion.

We mourn the loss of their presence from this world, and we also, perhaps even at the same time, take comfort that they live eternally with God where there is no more pain or tears, no more crying or death, and we anticipate with joy the day when we will be with them once again in paradise.