**Tears of Grace and Truth**

**John 11:1-7, 17-45**

**Parkminster United Church – Lent 5 – March 21, 2021**

This morning’s gospel lesson is a puzzling text. Many scholars have told us that the story of the death and raising of Lazarus is the gospel writer's rehearsal for the death and resurrection of Jesus. Others remind us that this is a story of hope: Jesus can restore life when all hope, when all possibility, is gone. And in a world overpowered by racism, terrorism, pandemics, and climate destruction, it is easy to give up hope sometimes.

It is precisely in the face of this that God challenges – almost dares us to read the stories of new life and new hope. How can we give in when God is so loudly proclaiming life in the midst of chaos? How can we share with others the hope that oozes from passages like these? Today’s gospel lesson is indeed one of holy mystery.

For those of you who grew up in the era of memorizing Bible verses for Sunday school this lesson may hold a special place in your heart. As one congregant once told me, “If we had a week full of desires to be regular kids instead of pious ones, I, or one of my classmates would whip out the shortest verse in the Bible, John chapter 11 verse 35—recite ‘And Jesus wept,’ and then smile smugly at our teacher, having fulfilled our holy task.”

Jesus wept. This morning, I am captivated by this verse; not for its brevity, but because of what being able to weep tells us about Jesus and all of us. This text is often used to speak of the divinity of Christ; however, I am compelled to speak of his humanity this morning. When Mary met Jesus on the road of sorrow, she was full of tears. Instead of being stoically above it all, Jesus responded to the news of the death of his friend with his own tears. He felt the pain of death and responded as many human beings would, he wept.

This has been an emotional time for our community. In recent weeks, dear families have lost loved ones and our hearts have ached for them as we prayed for them and offered care and support. As Facebook memories reminded me of March Breaks of years past in Florida, or gathering with friends and family, the actuality of a year into the pandemic feels far too real. And perhaps all of that was on my mind as I re-read this gospel passage to prepare for this reflection, and the words, “Jesus wept” unbound me and my tears began to flow.

Human tears. I am fascinated by them. Maybe it’s because I’m one of those people that can cry easily. One study states that human beings cry between 1.3 and 5.3 times a month. For infants, tears serve as an important communication tool, allowing them to show their need for support. That tool may also serve us well in adulthood, several recent studies have found.

But some of us have heard throughout our lives that it is not okay to cry. Some of you have commented to me that it is difficult for you to attend church when emotions are running close to your heart and soul. Some of you cry every week and wonder what is going on.

Still others have even decided to stay away for awhile, hoping to gain more control over their tear ducts. Who told us it is not okay to cry? What does our culture demand from us that makes dry people more valuable than wet? Why are we told to hold it together when what we really need is sacred permission to fall apart every now and then? What happens to a spirit when it learns to suppress feeling and just carry on?

A friend of mine, a colleague from a different denomination, has written about his father's death when he was a young man. His father died suddenly, and my friend not only attended the service, but he also did the eulogy and offered prayers at the graveside. He returned to school within the days that followed and moved through the years of his life, raising a family himself, tending to his work, later going to theological college, and even writing several articles for respected theological journals. Along the way, he began to cope with symptoms of anger and depression, and even took to bringing tiny bottles of whisky to the office to help him get through the day. Ten years after his father's death, he found himself in a 30-day program for alcoholism, where he finally wept for the first time over the death of his father. He writes that as the tears flowed, he found his life again and somehow got back on the road toward home.

There are many kinds of tears and many ways that we can cry them. Mary comes to Jesus full of tears. In response to the news of the death of a friend, he weeps, too. There is plenty of grief in the story, but underneath, there are other emotions—frustration, anger, some fear, but also hope and a recognition of grace and a struggle for life. Tears are part of grief, but they can also arise out of the soul's desire to experience cleansing forgiveness and grace-filled thanksgiving for life and the power of love.

There are many kinds of tears. How many times have you wept at the sight of someone you love? How many times has a tree of leaves glistening in the sunlight caused you to tear up and say a quiet thank you to the Creator? Can you listen to a particular song without wanting to weep and become one with the music? Our tears are a sign that we are alive and thankful for being here to witness the world.

There are also the tears of anger, shame, and sorrow. The shootings at three Atlanta-area spas this past week killing 8 people including 6 Asian women highlights the vulnerability, the invisibility, and the isolation of working-class Asian women. As one report noted, “When they go missing, or when they die, the loss of their lives will not incite the same kind of rage. And they won't even be treated with the same humanity.” Anti-Asian hate crimes have more than doubled during the pandemic, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University. (Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/18/us/metro-atlanta-shootings-thursday/index.html>). However, this is not relegated to the United States. In fact, Canada has a higher number of reported hate crimes per capita – with anti-Asian hate crimes in Vancouver alone rising by 878% in just one year. (Source: The Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF). These ongoing racist attacks and acts of violence endanger our Asian siblings and corrode our communities. Acts of white violence and terror; acts of hate and power speak once again to our call to dismantle the system of violent white power. These most recent events join with other urgent reminders that we must continually strengthen our efforts for justice and seek to transform the racism and conflicts that afflict our society. When we confront the extreme violence of systemic racism we want to cry out in horror and shame.

Parker Palmer believes that as North Americans we have failed to treat the underlying cynicism, hatred, and anger in our culture, leaving many of us broken-hearted and miserable. The heart made brittle and dry will shatter into a thousand pieces, making it impossible to retrieve and reassemble. But if the heart is a supple, well-exercised muscle, it can be broken open rather than apart, creating within us a larger capacity for both suffering and hope. This ability—and call—to hold the world with all its pain and beauty becomes the community of the broken-hearted.

I don't know for sure, but I wonder if that is what some of us experience when we cry in church over a particular piece of music, when we hear a word that seems spoken for our hearts alone or when we remember someone who was once with us and is here in body no more. We become card-carrying members of the community of the broken-hearted, those who can hold onto the exquisite moments of life, acknowledging our fragility as well. One theologian once wrote that there are moments of such grace, that are so pure, so lovely and so beautifully painful that a tear comes to the eye, not because of sorrow, but because the universe is so truthful in that moment.

I know that without these moments, I could not go on. Without being able to grieve, I could not celebrate, and without being able to hold on, I could not let go, and without crying, I would not be able to throw back my head and laugh.

Being part of the holy mystery that is the community of the broken-hearted is not the gift of a precious few; life gives us the blessing of being able to live with broken hearts if we are willing to live in this way. The response to Jesus' tears in the story by those who are watching him is simply, "see how he loved him?" Our tears remind us that we love even in the midst of our losses and that we can grow only more compassionate, not less, as we move through the length of our wild and precious lives.

A long time ago, a dear mentor reminded me that tears are a gift, not a curse, and that the world would be a better place if we watered it with our tears…and our deep joy in just being alive to the beauty and the wonder of life itself.

When I read or hear the words “Jesus wept”, I know that Jesus wept, just as surely as I weep, for our tears are Jesus’ tears. In the words of the apostle Paul, we do not grieve as ones without hope.

Dare to imagine a world where we use both our opening hearts and opening our minds, to embrace suffering and hope. Soon, we shall hear Jesus’ call, “Lazarus come out!” and we shall emerge unbound free to live and be love in the world. Let us be Christ in our care for one another. Resurrection, just as surely as springtime, is coming. So, join me in the thriving community of the broken-hearted! May tears of joy and sorrow flow freely in this place. May our hearts become, in Parker Palmer’s words, not just a fist, but “a supple, well-exercised muscle…giving us a larger capacity for both suffering and hope” (see his blog about his book called *The Politics of the Brokenhearted: Opening the Heart of American Democracy* at [www.couragerenewal.org](http://www.couragerenewal.org)). May it be so.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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