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## WONDERING ABOUT WEEPING

JOHN 11:32-44; REV. 21:1-6

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON ALL SAINTS SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2024

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I'm wondering about weeping. As we experience geopolitical conflicts, (inter)national political polarization, (inter)national natural disasters, and so much more, there seems to be good reasons to weep. So today, I'm wondering about weeping. I'm thinking like Smokey Robinson about the tracks of tears.

In ancient Greek mythology, Phaeton, the son of the sun god Helios and the water nymph Clymene, was struck down by Zeus for driving the sun recklessly. His sisters wept so much that their tears turned to amber and grew into trees along the riverbank. These trees became known as weeping willows. Those trees symbolize grief and mourning among other things. And if you know what these trees look like with their drooping branches, they almost look like they're gushing or overflowing with tears. This tree, because of its shape, is literally a downer while we're supposed to be an upper people, an Easter people. But I'm wondering about weeping, wondering whether there's more to weeping in the Christian life than meets the eye or is in the eye.

Weeping is mentioned in our scripture lessons today, but it shows up all throughout the Bible too. In Ecclesiastes, we hear there is "a time to weep." In the Psalms, we hear "my tears have been my food day and night." The exilic people of Israel declare in Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." And what about Rachel? "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." The prophet Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" and after he asks that famous question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" he says, "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" Throughout history, the people of God have wandered around weeping. So, I'm wondering about weeping.

Whether it be institutional or global or communal or personal, it seems like a good time to weep over all the innocent lives lost because of war or malnutrition or contaminated water; over parents, the Rachels and Ronalds of the world, weeping for their children for they are no more. Over children swept away by the floods of Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina. Over siblings falling to their deaths in oceans by freak accidents. All tragedies turning enduring joy into weeping in the morning. Maybe it isn't even a tragedy but just plain ole reality. Loved ones, here one day and gone the next, due to natural causes. The saints we love, all the saints, we sorrow over.

At Duke recently, there have been at least three key figures to cross over the Jordan—Dick White, Gerald Wilson, and Joel Fleishman. They were, to use Rick Lischer's words, "God's faculty," who made Duke and the world brighter. Even in theological education, important luminaries have passed within the last month or so—David Daniels, Barbara Holmes, Barbara Wheeler, Gustavo Gutierrez, and we know there are more or more coming. You may or may not know the names, but God knows their names, and someone is weeping in sorrow over them as their heart becomes a weeping willow.

Weeping can flow like a flash flood, causing poet Gregory Orr to write:

*Weeping, weeping, weeping.  
No wonder the oceans are full;  
No wonder the seas are rising.  
It's not the beloved's fault.  
Dying is part of the story.  
It's not your fault either:  
Tears are also...*

*If weeping  
Is one of the world's tasks,  
It doesn't lack adherents.*

There's a time to weep. Tears are a part of the life of faith. Weeping is human. It's scriptural. It's Christ-like to weep. I once had a seminary professor, Jim Loder, who sometimes wept during his lectures, and if you didn't like it, let's just say he'd speak to you in other tongues.

In the Church, some may subscribe to a muscular, machismo Christianity where you don't show emotion or don't cry, as if this is not a part of the Christian life and rather somehow a sign of weakness or limitation or lack of faith. But, as the King James version of John 11 notes, "Jesus wept." The Son of God wept. Thus, to weep is a faithful way of following Jesus and an expression of God's own life and heart.

Jesus himself is twice "greatly disturbed" about the death of his friend Lazarus. He's angry at the fact of death. He's not upset at the mourners because he eventually joins them in the shedding of tears. He weeps angrily at death's hold on Lazarus. The presence of death extracts tears from Jesus, and he's angry, as we may have been at the death of a loved one.

His loss is great and now Mary, repeating what Martha had already said, tells Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Can you imagine someone blaming a death on you because you were late to the hospital room? We aren't told what was on Jesus's mind, but we know he "saw [Mary] weeping and the Jews ... with her also weeping." And weeping is more than tears; it includes wailing and lamentation for the dead. It's an ancient Jewish expression of mourning and grief. Mary weeps, accompanied by others, perhaps professional mourners, who also weep. And then we learn that "Jesus began to weep."

He doesn't distance himself from grief or sorrow but enters into it as an act of solidarity with those who grieve. He enters the fragility and suffering of human life. So even in our weeping, Jesus is God *with* us, embodying the call to weep with those who weep, so that we are never alone but accompanied in our own suffering.

It is human solidarity when he weeps, but when he wept, the people there also said, "See how he loved him!" Jesus weeps as a sign of his love for Lazarus, not just to be in communal solidarity with Mary and the others. This semester, I keep coming back to Nicholas Wolterstorff's 1987 book *Lament for a Son*, about the tragic death of his 25-year-old son, Eric. He writes, "If [one] was worth loving, [one] is worth grieving over. Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved..." Jesus loved his friend and so he wept like a lullaby of love, just as we do for those who have gone before us—our friends, our brothers, our sisters, our sons, our daughters, our fathers and mothers and grandparents and colleagues and coaches and mentors and teachers. All saints. To weep is to love and to love is a call to suffer, even when it endures longer than a million midnights. The weeping way of Jesus leads to his logic of suffering love epitomized on a cross. And the tears we may shed at times are the waters flowing from our own baptism clothing our face, which is a recognition that the baptized life can be a burdensome life.

Weeping can feel weighty as we wander and walk through life's circumstances. We may not even think our weeping is of any significance but as I wonder about weeping, there seems to be more to it than just sorrow, especially in the light of Christ. Emily Dickinson wrote this very short poem:

*It's such a little thing to weep—  
So short a thing to sigh—  
And yet—by Trades—the size of these  
We men and women die!*

What Dickinson teaches is that little or short things, such as weeping or sighing, may have significant consequences and impact; in her poem, these little things can lead to metaphorical or literal death. Something deemed so small like the practice of weeping can be a huge harbinger of hope.

What we see with Jesus is that weeping can be a prelude to life, resurrection, and something new. It could be that our tears are prayers for the new. It could be that the Psalmist was right when he said, “those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy” (Psalm 126). And earlier in the gospel story, Jesus says that he’s the resurrection and the life, which is why Mary and Martha were so upset that he wasn’t around when Lazarus died.

So, if the One who is the resurrection and life weeps, then Christian weeping occurs as resistance to death and a means to resurrection hope and life and the new. Jesus weeps and then Lazarus is raised; his weeping is a watery womb for resurrection. It’s as if we have Good Friday and Easter right in this moment. But then after the resurrection, Jesus says, “Unbind him and let him go.” So the way of weeping is a pathway to freedom as well because Lazarus is not only resurrected but then he’s set free, meaning you can be breathing and still bound.

As I wonder about weeping, I realize that the wonder of weeping is that it’s a precursor to the fulfillment of the divine promise that one day we won’t need to weep. We weep now on the old earth but as Revelation depicts in the new earth, God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more....” No more breast or pancreatic cancer, no more limes or heart disease, no more juvenile dermatomyositis, no more hip or knee replacements, no more mental health struggles, and as the spiritual says, “no more weeping and a-wailing.” Because all things will be made new.

We won’t need to weep anymore because there will be the ultimate death of death, so our tears will be replaced by other waters. The lectionary doesn’t include it but the rest of verse 6 in Revelation 21 says, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” and earlier in Revelation 7, we also hear that God “will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” The wiped-away tears of sorrow become the waters of life and joy for every morrow. The waters of our present weeping will become the waters of the wonder of the new creation. So weeping, though eventually ceasing, ushers in something new.

And we need something new right now in our world. But not everyone wants resurrection life or newness, which is why after Jesus raises Lazarus, there’s a plot to kill Jesus and a plot to kill Lazarus, showing us that some never want others to truly live or to be free; they like the old and never want it to pass away. They like Lazarus tied up and dead.

But God in Christ ushers in the new and he does it through weeping as a sign of his wondrous love. What wondrous love is this that we see at this table?

According to the Greek myth about Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, when she wept in sorrow and grief her tears were transformed into flowers and as they fell to the ground they blossomed into anemones.

At the communion table, salvation sown in death blossoms into life, reminding us that although weeping may endure for the night, joy comes in the morning, so this is actually the feast of the victory of God.

Joy comes in the morning with this manna. “Morning by morning new mercies I see.” This morning, come see mercy, come smell the flowers, come receive your joy.