

The God Who Cries

“Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb” John 11:38.

I don't like to cry. I don't know about you, but for me crying is similar to being sick. I'm going to be as stubborn as possible to try and fight it off until I can't any longer. Even though crying is often a very healthy thing, and I'll admit to as much for others, personally I won't let myself have the same understanding. Maybe it's because I'm worried about being an “ugly crier” (whatever that means) or that it'll make me look weak; crying is something that I'm going to try and avoid if possible.

Truth be told, even though I admit to feeling this way about crying, I'm never really able to control my crying. The moment is going to come whether I want it to or not and often if I've tried to fight it off for some time, the moment is going to be much bigger than if I'd just let it happen right away. I've cried in frustration at basketball practice. I've cried being overwhelmed with school. I've cried because a certain movie's ending touched me more than I wanted to admit. I've cried when certain songs or hymns are played, like *Abide with Me* at funerals. I've cried as I watched families say goodbye to their loved ones as the casket is closed for the final time.

I guess since I've already been this honest with you, I'll share what I think these experiences have ultimately taught me about why I personally don't like to cry. For me, I think it's that state of helplessness that I feel when I cry. I have to face the fact that I can't change what is causing me to cry and sometimes I can't even explain why something is causing me to cry. All I know is that something is off. Because of sin, something isn't how it is supposed to be and I can't fix it. Even when I have the honor and privilege to sit with others as they cry, that feeling of helplessness lingers. So often I'd like to be able to remove whatever is causing that individual to cry, but I can't and it's so frustrating.

One of the clearest examples from my life of this helpless feeling happened when I was nine or ten and it has stuck with me to this day. Forgive me, if you've heard this story before. Back in Pittsburgh, there was a young man named Donny Giles. He was a few years older than me and he was one of those “older boys” that I looked up to even though I didn't know him very well. Sadly, at a very young age, Donny died from a tragic accident. My family went to the funeral and I remember seeing Donny there in the casket and it just didn't make sense. What my eyes saw wasn't right. He shouldn't have been there lying lifeless – not at this point. And I couldn't stop crying. I remember people trying to console me wondering if I was a relative and I would say, “No”, but I still felt as helpless as if I was that closely connected. All I wanted to do was run into the bathroom and be alone.

I'm not sure there's a much more helpless feeling in this world than crying as you're being forced to face the reality of death. Death is the ultimate moment in this world where we can't avoid the truth that something isn't right in this sinful world. It's the culmination of so many other sinful struggles that grieve us in this world and once it's happened, there's not a thing we can do to change it. And this state of helplessness isn't one I think any of us like. It's a reason why we have such difficulty saying something in these moments and why we often resort to distractions to cope and deal with the loss.

This weekend's Gospel reading addresses this helpless state. Jesus' words and actions show us that this helpless state, especially in the face of death, isn't one we face alone. He, the Lord of life, is present in these moments. And He is present not to tell us to simply suck it up and get over it, but to assure us that He knows our grief personally. He knows better than us that something isn't right in these moments because He created this world perfectly without sin and death. And even though, Adam and Eve brought sin and death into this world and our own actions continue to affirm this fallen reality, Jesus didn't shy away from entering this fallen world so tainted by sin and death.

The verse from our Gospel text this weekend that begins to show us Jesus' care and compassion in the sinner's helpless state is verse thirty-eight, **“Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb.”** As you hear these words, you'll notice that this isn't the first time that Jesus is deeply moved in this moment of Lazarus' death. We're actually drawn to some of the context preceding these words where we learn that Jesus is affected by Mary's and several others' grief and that He himself also cries at Lazarus' tomb. Here's that context directly from John's Gospel: **“Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord come and see.’ Jesus wept. So the Jews said, ‘See how**

he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?’” (John 11:32-37).

This moment at Lazarus’ tomb is truly stunning. Jesus, even though He knows what He will do next, doesn’t scold them for crying. He doesn’t try to rush them through their grief. In fact, their grief troubles Him likely because He knows that things shouldn’t be this way. Death shouldn’t be terrorizing His people this way because this wasn’t the way He designed it. And instead of becoming vindictive and calloused because these sinful people brought this on themselves, Jesus, Himself cries. Here the Lord of all creation, who has many more details to watch over, cries at the loss of a friend. Truly human yet without sin, Jesus personally weeps at the loss and damage that death has done to Lazarus’ family and friends.

Jesus’ crying is not lost on those there with him. Those present recognize His love, care and compassion. However, what is lost on them to some extent is that this was also their God who wept with them. Mary’s remarks and the remarks of some of those present seem to imply that now that death has occurred nothing can be done in that moment. They were still helpless and Jesus as caring as He was, was still just as helpless as them now that death had occurred. But Jesus wept not as one who was unable to help. And this truth makes such a difference! Yes, He personally stepped into this family’s state of helplessness knowing that He could still do something even though Lazarus was already dead for four days.

So, deeply moved again, Jesus goes to the tomb. Out of care and compassion for those present He prayed out loud so that they might learn more about who He was and with just the words from His mouth, He raises Lazarus from the dead. Jesus wasn’t an ugly crier, He wasn’t weak even though cried and He certainly wasn’t crying because He felt helpless. He cried out love for His sinful people and in understanding of the pain and separation sin and death brings. He cried because He cared and He was willing to be with this family in the midst of their sadness.

Jesus’ personal touch in the midst of death wasn’t for Lazarus’ family only. As result of this miracle, Jesus had squarely put Himself in the crosshairs of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. They were going to kill Him and He wasn’t going stop it. Instead, as Caiaphas, the high priest unknowingly prophesied, He was going to die for the sake of the whole Israelite nation and all of God’s children scattered throughout the world. So, several days after He raised Lazarus, Jesus Himself, died upon the cross so that death would no longer have the final word. And rising from the tomb, He removed death’s sting for good so that believers in Him would no longer weep, grieve and cry from this loss in a state of helplessness, but rather in state of hope – that just as He was Lazarus’ resurrection and life, He was every believer’s resurrection and life too.

I know that this was what Donny Giles’ parents clung to even as their tears flowed at the loss of their son. In fact, the Lord was gracious enough to show me one way that He was personally turning their tears of helplessness into tears with hope. Unsure of what I could say to this family, and honestly unable to talk to them in the moment of the viewing, my parents gave Donny’s parents a little letter that I had written for them. Inside this letter, was a small picture of Jesus in heaven with His arms wrapped around an individual welcoming that person home to heaven. I couldn’t tell you the exact words I wrote, but in some nine-to-ten-year old’s way I shared with them that this is what I knew was going on for Donny right now. He was with Jesus the One who had died and risen for him. And not too long after that viewing and funeral, I received a note from Donny’s parents and in that note, they told me that they had that picture painted as a mural in their house. Only now, years later, can I more fully appreciate how God, even in that moment, could bring forth tears of hope.

My dear friends in Christ, what our God did for Lazarus’ family and for the Giles’ family He continues to do for you and for me. When our tears of helplessness flow, He is present. He is there with understanding, as One who has witnessed these tears flow down sinful cheeks before. He is there as One who has cried out of love and compassion for what sin and death have done to us and our loved ones. He is there as One who turns our tears of helplessness into tears of hope. He is there as the One who has conquered sin and death for all eternity. And He promises to be the One who will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes. May this God who cried in the face of death, died to defeat death, lives so that we might not taste death eternally and reigns so that someday we might live without sin and death grant You His peace and comfort this day. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan