

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 11: “The Salt in My Tears”

I don't know if you noticed, but there were a lot of tears mentioned in our scripture readings this morning – specifically tears of grief and mourning over the deaths of loved ones. All Saints Sunday is a day when we pause and remember those who have died and passed the mantle of faith on to us. All of those who we remember today were close to us, and while we look back with fondness and thanksgiving, the remembrance is mixed with grief over their loss. Their absence hurts. So, fair warning -- All Saints Sunday may bring tears.

Historically speaking, we followers of Jesus have had an uncertain relationship with grief and tears. Some Christians will tell you that it's not “appropriate” to grieve over the death of another Christian. They'll say something like, “Those who die in Christ have gone to *be* with Christ. They've been promoted. They're living the everlasting joy of a resurrected life! So we should be happy and rejoice in their *victory* over death.” And that's not surprising because, in the early church, one of the most obvious differences between Christian funeral practices and Roman funerals was that in Christian funeral processions everyone wore white instead of black and sang hymns of praise to the God who *triumphs* over death. But is it true that our faith should banish all grief and tears? The ones who say “yes, of course” would find plenty of support in our reading from the prophet Isaiah. Verse 8 says, “The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.” Which sounds almost exactly like what we read in Revelation 24 back in September when John writes – “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” So it makes sense, right?

That is until Jesus comes around to turn everything upside down. He's good at that isn't he? This morning, Tom read part of the story of Jesus weeping over the death of his friend Lazarus. Here's something I want you to think about for a minute -- Grief is not all about what we think is *happening* to the person who has died. Go to O'Hare airport on the day

after Navy Boot Camp graduation and watch the families that are saying ‘goodbye’ to their loved ones who are getting ready to ship off to their first assignment. There’s grief everywhere! Sure, the parents are proud of their sailors, but it’s not all sunshine and smiles. People are crying. There are tears everywhere. And nobody has died! Why are they grieving? Because grief is about loss. And no matter how proud we are for what they’re doing, and no matter how excited they may be for their new adventure, *we* are losing them for a time and we are *grieving* their absence. Even as we celebrate their accomplishments and good fortune, our grief is still real and raw and worthy of tears. A hole has been left in our world, and daggone it, we’re going to weep over that hole. And yes, Isaiah and John say there will be a day when tears will be wiped away and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, but they do *not* say that this day has *come*. It may be on the horizon, but it’s still a promise that is yet to be realized.

So let’s talk about this story of Jesus weeping over his friend Lazarus. There’s a lot more to this story than what Tom read this morning, but I chose to zero in on one aspect of it. John’s account of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus makes it quite clear that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. Jesus told his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” So, if Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus, why did he weep? There’s no Lazarus shaped hole that he’s going to have to live with for the rest of his life. He knows Lazarus will be up and about in a few minutes. Why the tears, Jesus?

The simplest and most common answer that we hear is probably at least partly true, and that is that Jesus is grieving over the continued intrusion of death into God’s creation. Even though this particular death will be reversed, at least for a time, Jesus still grieves the existence and continued *impact* of death. He feels the pain death causes people and he’s upset at its continued capacity to tear people apart and mess people up. Here’s another thing to consider -- There are plenty of other places in the gospels that describe Jesus’ compassionate identification with our pain. But there’s something special here in this story ... something that

I think, in this situation at least, was unique to Jesus. It was a grief that was his alone. Right after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests and the Pharisees decided to hold a council where they laid out a plan to have Jesus killed. So think about this: Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead was the trigger that set off the chain of events that led to his crucifixion. The gospel writer makes it pretty clear that Jesus *knew* it would lead to his crucifixion! He *knew* what this was going to cost him!

If you've ever read CS Lewis's book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* or have seen the movies, you'll remember that after the Lion, Aslan, decided to offer himself to be killed in place of Edmund, he became sad and moody and depressed. He quit eating. He became withdrawn and miserable. You might too, right? Just because you've *accepted* your death doesn't mean you *welcome* it. This is the same story. Aslan was saving Edmund from death, but only by walking there to meet him in death. Jesus is saving Lazarus from death, but only by resigning himself to meet death in the first place. And in this little story, we are seeing a snapshot of a bigger story: Jesus is saving us all from death, but only by resigning himself to walking to meet death in our place. And so, Jesus wept. And well he might. And well might *we* weep too!

Yes, there *is* a promise of a day where tears will be wiped away and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Clearly on that day we will be reunited with our loved ones and with the whole communion of saints who have gone on before us. Because how could every tear be wiped away and every grief banished if it *weren't* so? And hallelujah, great will be the rejoicing when that day comes. But between here and there, between now and then, there's still a road of tears to be travelled. The good news is that in Christ, our griefs are gathered into his grief. And so our griefs participate in his grieving, in his weeping, in his offering of himself for the life of the world.

In a little while, we're going to recognize some of the names who form the cloud of witnesses who have inspired us to follow them in their

journey of faith. And then after that, we'll gather around the Lord's Table surrounded by an even greater cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us. And this is only a taste of the glory to come ... it's only a sip of the first fruits. For now it's *not* going to fill those holes that various people have left in our lives. But here at this table, even our grieving, even the mix of fondness and sadness that our remembering brings us, even our brokenness, is gathered into Jesus' wholeness so that all of it is offered to God in the quest to bring that day soon.

So grieve freely. It's okay. There's no shame in it. Grieve in protest against the lingering presence of death in this world. But offer your grief to God, so that in Christ, all grieving may be offered in the cause of calling the dead to life, once and for all, so that all may be one again and every tear may be wiped from our eyes, and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things will have passed away and all will be well.