

The Gift of His Tears

By

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John 11:28-37

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. 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 have kept this man from dying?”

“Jesus wept.”

Those two words answer the Bible trivia question of “What is the shortest verse in all of Scripture?” It comes from the passage we just read and, more specifically, from the King James Version of it. Even though the NRSV translates that line as “Jesus began to weep,” it is still true that among the 31,000 verses in the Bible, John 11:35 is the shortest.

Given its brevity, I suspect one or more of you might hopefully wonder, “Does that mean this will be the shortest sermon of John’s tenure?” To which I offer an even briefer reply: “No.”

That description of Jesus comes toward the end of the narrative we have been exploring during Lent. To remind you of events, Jesus had received word a week earlier that his friend Lazarus was very ill. He waits two days before setting out. Upon arriving in Bethany, Jesus learns that Lazarus is dead and his body has been in the tomb for four days. His sister Martha comes to Jesus, and in a tone that sounds like a complaint to me, says things could have been different had he arrived sooner. She goes on to name her trust that even then God would grant whatever Jesus asked of his father. In the conversation that follows, Martha voices confidence in some future resurrection. Jesus responds, “I am the resurrection and the life,” and asks, “Do you believe this?” Martha then becomes the first one in this gospel to declare that Jesus is the Messiah.

Today’s reading resumes the narrative as Martha goes to her sister Mary and says, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” Above this sanctuary’s front door, carved in stone, is the same verse as heard in the King James: “The Master is come and calleth for thee.” Mary runs to Jesus, and the other mourners—referred to by John as “the Jews”—follow. Mary falls at Jesus’ feet and voices the same complaint as Martha. “When Jesus saw her weeping,” we read, “he was greatly disturbed in spirit and

deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’” The mourners reply, “Lord, come and see.” John then reports, “Jesus began to weep.”

This morning, I’d like to spend our time seeking to understand that reaction. I have chosen this homiletical direction fully aware that we will not have a certain answer by sermon’s end, too, as tears can surface for all kinds of reasons.

Consider, for instance, the troubling war that continues in the Middle East. In those first images of a crowd in Tehran celebrating word of their former Ayatollah’s death, I suspect some of the people shed tears of joy. Having not had a relative to serve in the armed forces since the Civil War, I can only imagine that families with loved ones in harm’s way today have experienced tears of anxiety. For those who deeply oppose the war, it wouldn’t be a surprise if fury over the conflict has led to tears, too. And certainly, there have been tears of grief from those who have experienced irreplaceable loss from the death of family and friends.

Those who witnessed Jesus’ response outside Lazarus’ tomb had a ready explanation for his response as one of the onlookers said, “See how he loved him.” That unidentified voice could have been correct in naming the result of Jesus witnessing the grief of Lazarus’ sister and other mourners present. It’s not unusual to feel our own tears surface when others are upset.

Yet it has always struck me as odd for Jesus to weep, either from his own grief or from that of those present that day, since he knows what is about to happen. He is moments away from offering the signature sign of his power and authority over death itself. Would he have wept knowing the transformation he is about to bring? It’s possible, but I am not so sure, and thus want to explore other possibilities further, fully aware that it could be a fool’s errand.

There's an old story of a minister who was ending one pastorate to begin a new one. At the farewell reception, he approached one woman who was weeping. "Don't be sad," he said, "I'm sure the next pastor will be better than I." "That's what they said the last time," she cried, "but they keep getting worse." (Ortberg, John, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, 1997, p. 153)

In any moment, it can be risky to seek the reason behind tears, but we proceed even so.

This passage is another one of those occasions when English translations can fail to capture the nuance of the original words. The key Greek verbs, it seems to me, describe Jesus after he saw both Mary and the other mourners weeping. He "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved," we read. The ones who had followed Mary offer an interpretation as they remark, "See how he loved him!" From that moment on, many others have understood Jesus' tears as ones that arose from his compassion or his empathy because he saw others hurting.

That is certainly a possible way to interpret his response, but the same verse where we heard that Jesus was "greatly disturbed" also means one who is indignant. And the place we read that Jesus was "deeply moved" could also be translated as "agitated" and "troubled." Thus, others have suggested that the tears of Jesus were the result of anger.

New Testament scholar Gail O'Day thinks so. "The suggestion that Jesus is angry...fits the context better. Jesus may be angry that the 'Jews,' those who are not his own, have intruded onto the scene. The introductory verses repeatedly stress the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with Lazarus and his sisters. In addition, the 'you' of verse 34 when Jesus asks, "where have you laid him," is second-person plural...Jesus is speaking to the crowd, not the Mary alone. This exchange confirms that Lazarus's death is

no longer a family matter; it is a public matter.” (O’Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1995, p. 690)

Professor O’Day makes no mention of an additional detail, but perhaps you noticed that just after one voice in the crowd speaks of how much Jesus loved Lazarus, another one in that same group taunts him: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” I would guess that such criticism dried Jesus’ tears as he prepared to act.

Furthermore, our first lesson this morning describes the anger of Jesus’ father over human sin while offering hope. “God does not retain his anger forever,” the prophet says, “because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will treat our iniquities under foot.” We rely upon that promise whenever we turn to God in confession, but it doesn’t negate the possibility of divine anger as the initial response

Thus, the more I have pondered that scene outside Lazarus’ tomb, the more convinced I have become that it was anger that led to Jesus’ tears. Not only because it seems to fit the broader meaning of the Greek, but because it feels very human. At least to me.

During my college years, I was a member of a fraternity. One of the unique aspects of Greek life at Davidson was that, instead of bids being extended, students could join through a process known as Self-Selection. In January, after weeks of social events at the fraternities and other eating houses, there came a day when first-year students could fill out a form, showing in rank order which group they wanted to join. In theory, if a house had room for 20 newcomers, the first 20 who self-selected them were admitted. Actual practice was more complicated.

On the night of self-selection, there was a meeting at my fraternity house where the group reviewed the list of freshmen who had expressed a

preference to join. We moved through the list name by name until we came to Fred, a student who lived on the dorm floor where I, as a junior, served as a hall counselor. He was a good guy, easy-going, quick to laugh, and fun to have around. Even though I saw Fred every day, I didn't know until he had self-selected us.

One of the key criteria used for any potential new member at my fraternity was how often he had been at the house in the preceding months. Many brothers wanted the freshmen not only to attend social events, but also to hang out at other times, too. As an example, in a discussion that night about another applicant on the list, a brother said, "We talk all the time about how much we want potential pledges to be present. Well, this guy has been here more than the furniture!"

I couldn't say that about Fred. "He's a great guy," I began and named several other positive attributes, reminding them I was his hall counselor. "Did you know he was going to self-select?" someone asked. "No, but Fred can be shy at times." I knew what was going on. Fred was a skinny kid from South Georgia. Some would have called him a nerd. In new social settings, his introverted tendencies caused him to laugh at strange times and make odd comments. All of those traits had been true of me as a freshman. "Look," I went on, "I know Fred doesn't always make a great first impression, but he would be a wonderful addition. We should definitely accept him." With that word, the conversation ended. The group voted "no."

I look back on that moment, now almost 50 years later, and can tell you that there have been few times in life when I was angrier. Surely, part of it came from how my opinion had not mattered, unlike that of other brothers who had successfully advocated for a different self-selectee. That was a piece of it, but what really steamed me was the idea that this group of 19 and 20-year-olds thought they could make such definitive value judgments about another person.

After the vote, I did something I'm not proud of as I walked out without a word, slamming the door behind me. I was spitting nails, but for some reason walked directly to Fred's room. I wasn't going to share the particulars of the conversation. Yet standing inside his doorway, shaking with anger, I just said, "I'm sorry." Fred had no idea what I meant, but I repeated the words as tears filled my eyes. Then, before saying more, I left to walk around campus until I cooled down.

When I got back to my room, I found a note under the door from a fraternity brother saying that after I left, the group changed its mind and voted in Fred and everyone else on the list. "You should have been there, John. It was wonderful." While certainly happy with that outcome, things changed for me that night. I continued to eat my meals there until graduation and to attend a few social events, but from that day forward, I felt no bond with the group.

Jesus' response was far better, for despite the anger that I believe was behind his tears, God's son moved forward and in the brief narrative we will hear next Sunday, restored his friend to life. That part is clear. As John's narrative continues, not only do countless others witness Lazarus' resurrection, but in a bizarre plot just hours before Palm Sunday, some of Jesus' foes consider murdering Lazarus, fearing that his presence will cause others to follow Jesus.

The result of that moment is indisputable, but even at sermon's end, I can't definitively answer the question I raised earlier. Were Jesus' tears due to anger? We don't know. Were they the result of empathy he felt in seeing his friends so upset, or his frustration that this private act of bringing his friend back to life would be immediately known by others? We aren't sure.

Yet what is clear is that you and I received a gift on that day, revealing One who is all-powerful and yet also fully human; One who understands

that burden of grief and the impossible situations you and I face on occasion, too. Which is why on this day we can celebrate that brief verse just prior to revealing the depth of his tie to God: “Jesus wept.”