Sometimes Jesus Helps Us Weep

John 11: 1-45

Pastor Tom Henderson

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You may have noticed that our gospel readings for this season of Lent have been unusually long. Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus healing a blind man and I mentioned trying to preach on them is like being on one of those 10 countries in 7 days trips to Europe. Just hit the highlights and move along; don’t stop to sightsee. This morning, rather than trying to walk through the whole passage, I want to make two stops and ponder on two questions I had while reading the gospel. Why did Jesus wait? and Why did Jesus weep?

The story begins with Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, sending a message to Jesus. Lord, he whom you love is ill. As you read through the gospels, you get the sense that these three shared a special friendship with Jesus. Their home seemed to be the place where Jesus would visit when he just needed somewhere to go and be. It is when Jesus will spend the night during the first part of Holy Week. And that relationship makes what Jesus does here kind of puzzling. Let me ask you. What would you do if you got a phone call telling you that your dearest friend in the world was deathly ill? I think most of us would drop everything and get there as quickly as we could.

What does Jesus do? He talks theology. This illness does not lead to death. Rather it is for God’s glory, so that the son of man may be glorified. If it weren’t Jesus saying this I would add it to my list of things never to say in a hospital room or funeral parlor. It’s like telling someone who has just lost a loved one God has a better plan. It may very well be true, but usually not helpful in the moment,

On the surface, it doesn’t seem like that little speech will do Lazarus much good and it doesn’t appear to show much care or compassion for his sisters. And to make matters worse, after saying this, Jesus then waits another two days before making the two-day journey to Bethany. This only adds to their distress. It is hard to wait. If you’ve ever sat in the hospital or by the phone while someone you love is undergoing serious surgery you know that the minutes’ stretch into hours as you wait and worry. And you wonder, How can Jesus be so insensitive? How can he start talking about philosophy and theology as his friend lays dying? It almost seems like he’s using the whole situation to make some kind of point. Why does Jesus wait?

I do not know. People have speculated, but we are not told. Whatever the reason, we can see that Mary and Martha are upset. They are expecting Jesus to be the kind of friend who will drop everything and come to them. The kind of friend you and I would try to be. John tells us only that when Jesus heard that his friend was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was.

Each sister takes Jesus to task for his delay using exactly the same words. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. They add some words of respect. But there is an edge to those words. Behind them are the questions, Jesus, why weren’t you here? Why did you wait?

While I can’t explain the reason for Jesus’ waiting, I can certainly understand the reaction of Mary and Martha. We have been there with them. Where have you felt let down by Jesus? Where have you prayed, and waited and pleaded, but no answers have come? We don’t know why Jesus waits and we don’t know why God waits. We can theorize or rationalize, but, with the sisters, wait we will. Mary and Martha were not the first to wait for Jesus, nor will they be the last.

If we don’t know why Jesus waited, is it possible to know why he wept?

When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, Lazareth has already been dead four days. Mary breaks down in tears and Jesus says to her, Where have you laid him? Jesus is taken to the tomb and we are told, Jesus began to weep. I prefer the simplicity of the King James Version. Jesus wept.

We know why Mary and Martha are weeping. Their brother has died. Their’s are tears of grief and sadness. Those tears we understand. We have all stood by the graveside of someone we love and felt that sorrow just flow over us like wave upon wave..

But what about Jesus’ tears? Why does Jesus weep? Sometimes, when I’m not sure about a passage, I’ll look to see what commentators have to say. I found there is no shortage of opinions on the reason for those tears.

Some said that Jesus was weeping because of the lack of faith in the people in the crowd. He looked into their hearts and minds and realized that they didn’t understand him or his mission. He was weeping for the people because they didn’t believe in him.

Some speculated that Jesus was weeping because he hated to bring Lazarus back to life. He had set one foot in heaven, and now he was going to have to bring Lazarus back to the pain and suffering of this life.

Others said that they were tears of anger at the power of evil and death.

Many said that Jesus was weeping for himself. He was anticipating his own death. He knew this miracle, this sign, as John calls it, would be the last straw for the religious authorities. He was weeping because of the cross that lay before him.

Those are some of the thoughts I read. But that is all they are. Like the waiting, John does not tell us exactly what brought the tears. Any or all of them could be correct, but I wonder.

For Christmas, my sister got me a book on the history of philosophy. She’s kind of sentimental that way. It’s one page descriptions of the teachings of 300-400 philosophers from ancient times to the present. One of them is William of Ockham. He was an English philosopher from the 11th century and his theory came to be known as Ockham’s razor. The main point is that the simplest explanation is usually the best.

Why did Jesus weep? To me, the simplest explanation is because he cares. He cried for the same reason we cry at funerals. He wept because his dear friend had died. He grieved with Mary and Martha. He felt their pain and loss. That’s what friends do. They share your sorrow. They weep when you weep.

There’s a story of a little girl who came home late from school one day. Her mom was really mad and began scolding her. Finally, she stopped and asked the girl why she was late.

She told her mom, I was helping a friend who was sad.

What did you do for her, mom asked?

The little girl said, I sat beside her and helped her cry.

Why did Jesus weep? He wept for all those who pray and wait for God. He weeps for all those God forsaken times when we wonder where or if God is. He weeps with those near to death. He weeps with those who love them. He weeps for all the deep and unanswered questions in life.

And that is so powerful. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described this way. For we do not have a high priest who is not touched by our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted like us in every way, yet without sin. Jesus knows your sorrow, your suffering, your disappointments, your problems, your questions, your hopes, your fears. And Jesus not only knows those things in his head, he feels them in his heart. Jesus understands whatever it is you’re going through. He has been there. There is nothing so deep and dark in this life that the love of Jesus, crucified, died, buried and risen, is not deeper still.

What a comfort. Pain and suffering have a powerful way of isolating us. When we grieve, we can feel so very much alone. We feel like no one knows what we’re going through. Jesus knows. When we wait, Jesus waits. When we weep, Jesus weeps.

In 1995 the federal building in Oklahoma City was blown up in a domestic terrorist attack. 168 people were killed, including many little children in a day care center. More than 600 folks were injured. There is no explanation that can take away the pain and sorrow caused by that evil act. Several years later a nine-foot statue of Jesus was placed in the memorial across the street. But it presents a very different picture of Jesus. It is not Jesus strong and confident. It is not Jesus risen and victorious. It is Jesus with his face bent down, turned slightly away from the scene of the horror and covered with his hands. The plaque reads, And Jesus wept.

What does Jesus do for us? Sometimes he simply sits down beside us and helps us cry. And sometimes that is all we really need. Amen.