

Sermon for Sunday, November 7, 2021 - "Tender Tears"

All Saints Sunday
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Our readings today are awash in tears, so fitting for this day when we remember our beloved dead. In these readings we hear that God honors our tears and promises to tenderly wipe them from our eyes. God shares our tears - Jesus stands at the grave of his friend Lazarus and weeps. And God promises a future without tears. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, and *all peoples* will feast at God's banquet.

That phrase, *all peoples*, is key. God's promise of a future without tears is not just for a few, it is for everyone. Isaiah stresses that by using the word ***all*** four times. God will make "for ***all*** peoples a feast of rich food", God will "destroy the shroud [of death] cast over ***all*** peoples", "the sheet spread over ***all*** nations", God will "wipe away the tears from ***all*** faces." In God's promised future there will be no us and them, no separations, no divisions. We will ***all*** be healed together. We will ***all*** feast together.

We need this vision to give us hope in all times, especially in this difficult time for our country. There is so much anger, hatred, and violence right now. How can we live faithfully and hopefully amidst all of this? How can we be a healing presence in our world and live out our identities as saints of God?

Perhaps we need to take a cue from our readings today and focus on the tears. Perhaps we need to pay attention to the pain within us and within other people. God takes our tears seriously, maybe we should as well. This is not easy. Our culture is so often uncomfortable with strong emotions. We push them away. We try to put on a happy face. We stay busy. We choose to respond with contempt and cynicism rather than working with and through the deeper emotions of anger, fear, grief, and sorrow.

Jesus shows us a different way. He is real with his emotions at Lazarus' tomb. He weeps. He's greatly disturbed and deeply moved. He feels it all. He brings it to God in prayer. This glimpse of Jesus reminds me of a man I went to visit recently. He shared all his pain and frustration about the world with me. He didn't try to pretend everything was fine. He didn't remain polite or on the surface of things. He questioned why he was feeling all of this. He was honest and real and raw, like the Psalmists are. We talked and then we prayed about it all. It was a holy time. As I left, he apologized for ranting. Yet he was a witness to me of how to work with strong emotions. Acknowledge them, listen to them, name them, remain curious, and bring them to God in prayer. Healing can happen when we pay attention to our own tears, to our own grief and pain.

Healing can also happen as we pay attention to the pain of others. Recently I was convicted by a *New York Times* story about the pain of many who are unvaccinated.¹ I often feel angry about

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/opinion/covid-vaccines-unvaccinated.html>

people who are not getting vaccinated against COVID. I don't understand. Many people I love have gotten sick because others are not vaccinated. Yet there is more to it than I realized. There are stories about people like Josie and Tom Burko, a married couple who died from COVID within days of each other, leaving behind an 8-year-old daughter. They hadn't taken the pandemic lightly. They wanted to be vaccinated but Josie had a heart murmur and chronic diabetes and worried about an adverse reaction. Tom had muscular atrophy and similar worries. They were afraid and so had not yet gotten vaccinated.

There are so many similar COVID deathbed stories. People are concerned, confused, and afraid. It's easy to say that people should be more informed or seek advice from a medical provider, except many of the people who are unvaccinated have no health care provider. Many do not have health insurance. Many live in rural health care deserts. Many people, especially people of color, have numerous reasons to distrust the medical system in our country.

Recently in the *Atlantic*, Dr. Elaine Batchlor wrote about why she can't persuade her 93-year-old black mother to get a vaccine.² Just a few years ago, at the ER, her mother passed out after screaming in agony when her broken arm got manipulated and X-rayed without sufficient care for her pain. This experience fits a larger pattern. Black people are much less likely to be given pain medication or even treatment for life-threatening emergencies. These experiences on top of traumas in very recent history like the Tuskegee experiment have led to such pain and distrust.

If we are to bring healing to our divided country, we need to hear and honor these stories. We need to remain curious, open, and humble in the face of such sorrow. Of course, staying with our own and other's pain is not easy. We can feel so very exposed and raw. It's tempting to fight back the tears, to defend ourselves from the discomfort, to shut others out or attack them so we can have some illusion of control. So, we need more than a focus on our own and other's tears. We also need God's presence, God's care and God's promises.

And Beloved, God is so very present with us through Jesus. Jesus knows about deep grief, he wept for his friend. He knows the power of fear. He saw it in Lazarus' sisters who worried how they would survive in their patriarchal culture without their brothers' support. Jesus knows about anger and divisiveness. Some of the people gathered at the tomb sneered, "Why didn't Jesus prevent Lazarus from dying, he healed the blind man after all." Soon after Jesus raised Lazarus, this anger boiled over into a plot to kill both Lazarus and Jesus. Jesus experienced all of this and continued to choose the way of love and vulnerability. He did not defend himself or attack others, he gave himself in love.

And now the risen Jesus is here amidst all the pain of this time. He is present to give himself in love to you today. Here at this table, Jesus meets you to tend to your tears, to feed you with his love. Jesus gives you a foretaste of the feast to come in which ***all*** people will be gathered at the heavenly banquet.

You are not alone as you face the fear, anger, and sorrow of this world.
God is right there with you in it all.
God honors your tears - you can remain open to the pain of others.
God wipes away your tears - you can be a healing presence in the world.
God promises a future where tears will be no more - you can live with hope today and always.

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/09/im-a-black-doctor-i-cant-persuade-my-mom-to-get-vaccinated/619933/>

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.