

“Weeping with Jesus”

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Text: John 11:1-44

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In the midst of the story of Jesus’ greatest miracle we read this detail: “Jesus saw Mary weeping, and he saw how the people who were with her were weeping also. His heart was touched, and he was deeply moved.” He asked where the grave was and went there with them. As he stood outside the tomb, Jesus wept.

Why? Earlier in the story we learn that Jesus expected to find Lazarus dead and expected to raise Lazarus to life again. So why weep? There were going to be a lot of happy people around pretty soon! It should have been a time of excitement rather than sorrow. My guess is that several things were on Jesus’ mind. First, his heart went out to those whose hearts were broken. He felt compassion for them. He wept. But I think there was much more. Jesus had been performing signs and preaching for about three years, yet despite his efforts the people, in so many ways, weren’t getting it. He told them of his intention to raise Lazarus from the dead, but the people failed to appreciate that Jesus meant that physically, here and now. After all the miracles these people had seen Jesus perform, it didn’t occur to them that he could perform this kind of miracle. He wept. This event would solidify the resolve of the religious leaders to see Jesus killed. The cruel irony here was that the people who most served God wanted to kill the Son of God. He wept. It was the story of Lazarus’ resurrection running rampant through the crowds which drew them out for Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, shortly after. Yet that same fickle crowd would turn against Jesus, and mock him on the way to the cross. He wept. What works up Jesus? Jesus’ passion was for how things should be, and his compassion was for people stuck in how things really are. He saw what could be in life, and was moved—always moved— to do something about it.

Jesus saw the world so differently compared to those around him, and that was because Jesus looked at the world through the Kingdom of God. From Jesus’ perspective people should no longer mourn as they once did, because death is not the end. God’s love embraces us for eternity. Jesus had already brought the dead back to life, so people should have known he could do it with Lazarus. In the Kingdom perspective of Jesus the religious leaders would be following God’s leading rather than oppose it. And the people of God would be steadfast: not waving palm branches and praising him as a coming king one day then rejecting him the next. Jesus passion was for how things should be, and his compassion was for people stuck in how things really are.

A case in point was another day that Jesus wept. In Jesus' day most Jews longed for God's Messiah and hoped for a coming king. But what most of them wanted was for the Messiah to be a charismatic military leader to return their land to independence. But Jesus saw this as totally wrong-headed. To him the Kingdom of God was beyond such things and the people of God are to live in the ways of the Kingdom regardless of who the political rulers were. Thus Jesus taught, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's" (Mk 12:17). But the people didn't get this part of his teaching. On Palm Sunday Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'" (Luke 19:41-44). In these words we hear Jesus' sadness, that the people's sense of nationalism prevented them from really seeing how the Kingdom of God can be. What the gospel captures in these words was an anticipation of the tragic events that would take place a generation later in the Jewish-Roman War: the destruction of the Temple, the ruin of Jerusalem, and the final standoff at Masada. Jesus wept, because he had a passion for how things could be, and should be, and his compassion was for people stuck in how things really were.

The journey of Lent, for us, is always about how things could be and how things really are. It is to be a time for us to remember what Christ has done for us, and to evaluate our own life of faith as we stand under the shadow of the cross. In Lent we read the stories of the last days of Jesus, using them as a lens to help us reflect on our own discipleship. So as we contemplate today's story, it prompts us to ask of ourselves: What are the realities people are stuck in today? Do we have compassion for them? Do we have a passion for how things could be and should be? What do we weep for, alongside Jesus?

A great word is "insight". To gain insight is to have a penetrating understanding of a situation or of our own character. Sometimes we stumble upon insights like the proverbial treasure buried in the field. Many years ago a man arose in the middle of the night to walk off his insomnia. He left his comfortable home and affluent neighbourhood to walk the streets of a part of London, England he had never passed through before – the areas where the poor lived. What met his senses were all new experiences. He was from a class of society that lived totally out of touch with the harsh realities faced by those who scratched out meager existences day by day. With his eyes full of tears he was met at his door at dawn by his frantic wife, who asked, "Where have you been all night?". He replied, "Katherine, I've been to hell, I've been to hell!". The year was 1865. His name was William Booth. He told Katherine what he'd seen, and together they founded what came to be known as the Salvation Army. Katherine and William Booth had compassion for people stuck in how things really are, and came to have a passion for how things could be and should be. They looked upon their world through Jesus' eyes and wept, hearing Jesus' words "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a

stranger and you welcomed me... for just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it also to me" (Matt. 25).

Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian theologian, has written, "Tears are a biological gift of God. They are a physical means for expressing emotional and spiritual experience. But it is hard to know what to do with them. If we indulge our tears, we cultivate self-pity. If we suppress our tears, we lose touch with our feelings. But if we pray our tears, we enter into sadness that integrates our sorrows with our Lord's sorrows and discover both the source of and the relief from our sadness". We should listen to our tears," he writes, "for in a special way they can be a window in our soul: pointing out what we are passionate and compassionate about". At times our tears may even be the voice of God, as it was for Katherine and William Booth, telling us what we should be passionate and compassionate about.

But I wonder how readily our hearts go out to those whose hearts are broken? In the world of journalism the question is being asked whether the media has caused widespread compassion fatigue in society by saturating newspapers and TV reports with images and stories of tragedy and suffering. I wonder if our society has been so desensitized to human need that it takes something on the scale of the 2013 flood to jar our sensitivities into compassion, so significant that thousands and thousands of people turned out in those early days to help. But...time drifts, the news cycles move on to the next tragedy, and that tragedy faded from consciousness, even though many of the affected continued to suffer the consequences years after the event.

I also wonder whether the regular feed of big-story tragedies inoculate us against feeling compassion for those caught in small-story tragedies. For example, the lives of our neighbours can change dramatically because of a lost job, a death in the family, divorce, illness. These can quickly result in lost income for a family, dramatic disruptions in family routines, anxiety that can immobilize people. But given the social isolation we experience in our neighbourhoods we may not know the needs of our neighbour two or three doors away. And given the relative anonymity of our next door neighbours we may know them some but not enough to know the struggles they have.

Calgary Vital Signs report for 2018 highlights some of those struggles. One in ten Calgarians are considered low income. A quarter of Calgarians have not been able to find "suitable employment" and they cannot afford more than the necessities of life. 14% of Calgarians struggle with mental health concerns. For Canadians generally, 44% are living paycheque to paycheque and 40% feel overwhelmed by the household debt they carry. Sexual assault, abuse within families, immigrants who struggle to thrive in their adopted city, people who struggle with addictions. Last year the Calgary Interfaith Foodbank supported 180,000 Calgarians through food hampers. In February Calgary had the highest

unemployment rate in Canada at 7.6%. Many people in need work hard to cover it up because they are wary of social stigma...but just doing that adds to the stress they already experience.

So often when we hear stats and figures like this represented as “one in ten Calgarians” or “two out of ten Calgarians.” So I want you to imagine something. Picture the street you live on. Think about the 2-3 homes to the right of your house and the 2-3 homes to the left. The same across the street. We can walk to any of those homes in about one minute. You are picturing 10 Calgary households. One in ten has this need...two in ten have that need. What needs might exist within a one minute walk from your home?

I think we can address our compassion fatigue by coming alongside Jesus and looking at the world from his vantage point... and through his perspective rooted in the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is seen where the poor are blessed and the hungry are fed. Where peace is made and opponents are reconciled. Where enemies are loved. Where the injured are assisted. Where the stranger is welcomed. So if we come alongside Jesus and look upon our world from his vantage point, will we see hunger, suffering, confrontation? Jesus still has much to weep for.