

## TEARS IN A BOTTLE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 1, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 56:1-11;

Revelation 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

This week the widow of Patrick Swayze, Lisa Niemi, spoke of the grief that she has felt since her husband's death of pancreatic cancer on September 14. She said that she thought she could brace herself over the 22 months of Patrick's illness so that by the time he finally died she might have gotten accustomed to losing him. But in reality she says that grief is "an animal all of its own."

That is a lesson that only life can teach and that one person cannot describe adequately to another, it is so inherently personal and yet so pervasively human.

Madeline L'Engle, writing of her own grief for her husband Hugh Franklin, said, "...grief has to be worked through. It is like walking through water. Sometimes there are little waves lapping about my feet. Sometimes there is an enormous breaker that knocks me down. Sometimes there is a sudden and fierce squall. But I know that many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."<sup>1</sup>

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember those who have gone before us and all those who are still about us who are, in the most spacious meaning of the phrase, *saints* in heaven and on earth. *Saints* in the broadest definition of the word. Not canonized saints recognized for their miraculous documented deeds but simply the company of all the faithful in all times and in all places who have lived their life in faith and now live eternally with God.

In a sacred place like this, amid marble plaques and colored glass, weathered wood and aging cushions, we know that many who have gone before us and many who are with us now, realize what it is to come to the church on All Saints Sunday and sense the closeness of those who are so far away and yet so dear in our hearts, a great cloud of witnesses.

We remember today with fondness those who have been the lights of our lives and the joy of our homes, the parents and sisters and brothers, the children, spouses and partners, grandparents and friends; all those whom we have loved in this life and who have slipped from our arms into the strong arms of God, where they now dwell in God's nearer presence.

All three passages today from scripture bear a common theme, their reference to *tears* and what happens to them, because this is a Sunday when our hearts are heavy laden and tears are close.

The first of the lessons, are the words of Psalm 56; a plaintive appeal, “Be gracious to me, O God... O Most High, when I am afraid; I put my trust in you... You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle.”

And there’s an image for you, a God who keeps the tears we shed, saved in a bottle, as if none were lost, but all are treasured and known. It makes me think of the words to that wonderful old hymn, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” the verse that says, “There is no place where earth’s sorrows are more felt than up in heaven; there is no place where earth’s failings have such kindly judgment given.” The psalmist wants us to know that even our tears are kept safe in God’s keeping.

In the second lesson, today, there is a different scene. We are out at the cemetery with Mary and Martha when Jesus arrives in Bethany, delayed in spite of the news of the grave illness of his friend Lazarus. It’s Mary who greets Jesus and falls at his feet weeping, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” And the sight of her and all the friends of the family standing around trying to console her moved Jesus deeply. John even tells us, Jesus wept. His are the tears of the loss of a friend and the sorrow of a mourner. Jesus loved Lazarus, John says, and the tears are a measure of the depth of his feelings.

The last of the lessons today is the vision of John, not the gospel, but the Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the one that tells us how it all turns out, where everything is headed. It is a glorious vision, surreal almost in its dimensions and borders.

The writer sees *a city*, of all things, a *new Jerusalem* descending from heaven, adorned like a bride approaching her husband. And the voice from heaven announces that the home of God is among mortals, and God will dwell with us, and we will be God’s people, for God himself will be with us. And then, as if the news were so good that only tears would do on such a joyful occasion, the promise is made that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. For death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will pass away.

So in the end, this God who has kept all our tears in a bottle, and who himself knows how to weep, will wipe the last of our tears away, for mourning and crying and pain will be no more. This is the promise we

remember today, that in the end “God will wipe away every tear from our eyes”

Every tear, every face, every eye. That’s a lot of faces, a lot of tears.

Every now and then someone tells me, “I’ve never lost anyone before. My parents are living, grandparents are living, no one close, not even any friends have died yet.” Maybe a pet somewhere along the way, but other than that, certainly no significant human relationship touched by death. And of course, I listen and appreciate the good fortune, and wonder at the vulnerability of such a season in life because time will change all that. Time will do what time does to all of us, soften our hearts and deepen our love, so that our sense of loss will grow as we lose the ones we love. Grief is the debt we pay for loving deeply.

The eighties and nineties of this late era presented a specter only known in wartime and in plague, when a generation of young adults became infected with the AIDS virus, and 20-and-30-somethings all about us felt the sting of death biting close at hand; a time out of season as one after another, friends and lovers succumbed to a relentless stalker. It seemed so cruel, parents burying their children and young friends burying other friends. So many tears, so many faces.

We’ve seen a lot of tears in the past eight years, tears on 9/11 and on every anniversary of it since. Tears in Iraq as a generation of children have been born in that country who have never known anything but war. Tears in recent days in Kabul and Peshawar and Baghdad where bombings have killed hundreds, and the suffering goes on unabated. Today we will read the names of 27 soldiers who have died in conflict this week. Three from Iraq and twenty-four in Afghanistan.

So many tears, so many faces.

You and I get up in the morning and take a look in the mirror at a somewhat familiar face that we have seen before, but every day apparently older, more weighed down, more worried, more creased like the folding lines of an old letter opened and closed many times.

If it’s not the economy and the rising cost of everything, it’s the stresses at work, the threat that the boss will be cutting back again. You pad off to the kitchen and pick up the coffee pot and find that the arthritis in the hand is awake this morning and the pain shoots like fire along the nerve path in your hand. Knees are not what they used to be, and balance and coordination, and sight, and sleep. Our once elegant bodies, the pride of our

youth, now seem possessed by some alien force bent on cellulite and deterioration. Better to laugh about it than to cry I suppose, though there are days when tears are close, the mourning of a time that is no more because it is a reminder is that life has value because it ends which makes the living of it all the more important. So many tears, so many faces.

Life can make you cry sometimes. Heartbreak happens. The disappointments that are the wearing down of things, the little griefs that add up. Things we hoped for never happen. That trip to the Greek Isles... you won't be going now or ever. Promises are made and broken. The friend you counted on wasn't a friend after all or at least not the way you thought. The love you gave away never seemed returned, or when it was returned it came back in a package of torn wrappings and blunted edges and dented sides. As my friend Patrick Willson has said so well, "Life has a way of cheating us all before it's over. People wonder if we dare say such things in the middle of worship, but God knows so very well that when our hearts break open the tears flow out."<sup>2</sup>

Willson goes on, "The Gospel of John reminds us, 'Jesus began to weep.' Only one who knows the infinite cost of tears can be trusted with our tears. Jesus knows what it is to weep and he knows the extravagant costliness and gentleness of wiping tears away. God wipes the tears from our eyes... so that we may see something more precious even than our tears."<sup>3</sup>

Of course our tears make us feel self-conscious, alone, childish, I suppose. Women seem better at it than we men do. We were taught early on what Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* said to that play's hero, "Thy tears are womanish."<sup>4</sup> And were it not for the sexism of it, we might have bought the lie. But each of us knows what tears have been within us fighting to come out; and when and why. It is not a woman's or a man's emotion, but a human one, because tears compose the water that flows along the river of compassion whose headwaters are in the heart and whose rapids are in the eyes.

There are good things to be said of tears, you know. They cleanse the eye, they wash away the irritation, they unstop the bottle of sadness that needs to spill sometimes, because life does have sadness in it, and sometimes there is nothing to do but to be with it in its natural expression. In fact, sometimes our tears say all there is to say.

I shall never forget a counseling session some years ago. Someone came in with a story to tell, something sad and heartfelt. I ushered him in,

and after a few moments, I thought I should be steering our conversation to its purpose. “Was there something you wanted to talk about?” I asked in good counseling form.

And with that, I heard something about “doctor...” “my wife...” “someone...” “a man” “sorry...” A few words here and there, almost inaudible, disconnected, because what was really happening was weeping, deep, gut wrenching, cathartic weeping. I had the good sense to do two things. One was to keep my mouth shut and listen and let this happen, whatever it was. The other was to have a fresh box of Kleenex on the table in front of him, which I pushed toward him.

This went on for about fifteen minutes. Him weeping, me sitting and watching, and frankly feeling kind of misty myself at the sadness he was feeling. Eventually, he kind of got himself together, squared his shoulders, took several deep breaths, apologized for falling apart on me like this, and shook my hand as he left.

About three days later I received a note from him, written in his familiar scrawl. “I shall never forget what you did.” And for the life of me, I have no idea what I did other than to take him seriously, and to gather up his tears in the wadded up Kleenex. And we thought tears were all a waste.

Children know about tears and the usefulness of them. There are some things in life worth crying about and they know it. The broken things, the things you’ve worked hardest to make. The things you most long to have but cannot. The ones you least want to let go of, but must. The people you least want to hurt, but do.

They know about tears, the children do. And they know as well, instinctively, or need to know the promise of God, who has kept every tear in a bottle, and who in the end will wipe away every tear from our eyes, not as a way of disposing of tears, but with the gentle hand of a parent who knows the soothing value of weeping, and what it is to grieve and let go. Life is, after, a series of gifts received and gifts given, until at last we return the final gift itself, our lives.

The promise is that God intends for us more than we have yet imagined, a reconciliation and a glad reunion for which our earthly tears are but a hint and a promise.

Fred Craddock tells a story of a family that lived in his neighborhood in Oklahoma. They had a daughter that was wild. “She was,” as Craddock described her, “hanging off the backend of every Harley in town.” She was

arrested on some drug charges and sentenced to six months in jail. She was three months pregnant when she went into detention. She had her baby shortly before she was released, and the word got out that on Saturday she would be coming home from jail.

On Saturday, Fred says, everybody in the neighborhood was out mowing their lawn. In fact, he spent most of the afternoon out there mowing his lawn and looking up the street at that house where the girl was coming home. He mowed the grass about two or three times in neat alternating rows, keeping an eye up the street. About dusk he says he was down to scissors clipping single blades of grass, until at last that girl came home, and she had her baby in her arms and everybody in the family came out to welcome her, and they went inside and had a big meal and cake and a celebration. And she cried, and her dad cried, and her mother cried. Everybody was awash that afternoon at her welcome home party.

Our tears, are not simply a lament for things past, but an expression of our longing for something yet to come, a future better seen by God than it is by us who knows that tears of loss anticipate reunion. Tears of pain bring with them healing. Tears of friendship are the first expression of a lasting communion. For our tears are but a harbinger of what God would have us receive in the happiest of all endings, the one that John describes in the last of his Revelation.

All the tears on all the faces; God will wipe them all away so that we may see with utter clarity the vast inheritance God promises us with all the saints.

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<sup>1</sup> Madeline L'Engle, *Two Part Invention*. New York: Harper Collins, 1988. 229

<sup>2</sup> This quote and the substance of this paragraph are attributable to Patrick in his paper at the Moveable Feast, January, 2009. Unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Act III, Scene 3.