

March 13, 2022

Jesus Wept, Jesus Weeps

Luke 13:31 – 35

The church can't be a happy place all the time. Sometimes good church members tell me they come to church to get away from the real world and enjoy some peace and quiet. I shudder because this reminds me of Marx' infamous accusation that religion was the opium of the people. I think the church member is right to express frustration at the difficulty of daily life, but not about the role of the church. Life is more than laughter.

My sermon is about one emotion that the church usually says little about: weeping. This is a major part of our ancient history: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. God heard their groaning, and God took notice of them." Our most human book, the Psalms never shies from our weeping: "I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with **tears**; I drench my couch with my weeping." "My **tears** have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" "You have kept count of my tossings; put my **tears** in your bottle. Are they not in your record?" God's bottle of tears – gigantic, infinite.

### **Jesus Wept**

A verse of Scripture may seem a strange place to start, but I believe that "Jesus wept" incorporates all the humanity of our faith. I have a verse for you – a prequel to our gospel lesson: "Jesus wept." For as long as we have known about the suffering servants of God, there has been grief. Isaiah: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

"Jesus wept." Jesus went toward the agony of death. I'm not sure we realize the depth of Jesus' empathy for the dying and the dead. Give Jesus an EKG and it would come back EMPATHY off the charts. Jesus had empathy for rich people, and he didn't want their money. If the heart of Jesus teaches us anything, it is that empathy is our most powerful emotion. It is the driving force of Christian faith.

This verse is the only verse many people memorize. You are sitting at a table in a prayer meeting, maybe a Moravian love feast, and the leader says, "What's your verse?" You blurt it out, "Jesus wept." Someone else will have to quote, "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ

Jesus our Lord." Maybe we should stop here and go around the room and ask, "What's your verse?" Just kidding.

This is not the only time Jesus wept. Sometimes weeping doesn't come with tears. Sometimes grief is swallowed. In Zora Neale Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, we encounter a preacher who is possessed with a violent streak. He tries to beat his own shame out of his wife, Lucy. As she sinks in despair toward death, Lucy says,

**"Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus."**

Guess what? Today's gospel text says Jesus wept over Jerusalem, because they didn't know the things that make for peace. Jesus loved Jerusalem. We need people who love the church and the nation more than they love their political commitments, their various and sundry positions on social issues. Jesus wept because Jesus loved Jerusalem. Where are those who weep for America's broken democracy? Where are those who weep for our stubborn determination not to be good stewards of this planet? Where are those who weep for the onslaught of greed, pride, anger, and revenge that dominates our landscape? We still in our purple mountain majesties, but we have too many red-faced, angry politicians. Thank God for our spacious skies, but our narrowed minds and deep prejudices need to dissolve into the clouds. The fruited plain that feeds so many is a miracle of God and farmers, but the toxic greed stifling life is a house of horrors. Our nation extends from sea to shining sea, but now we must stare down the face of "callous indifference to the suffering wrought by our imperialism" (Cornell West). Now, we summon those

**"Who more than self their country loved, And mercy more than life."**

Instead of weaponizing our rhetoric, we need to be weeping for the flaws of our nation. These bragging, strutting, vulgar-talking politicians are not the future. We should counter their vileness with our virtue. We should out-debate, out-think, and out-perform them. Until we weep for the pain of everyone, we will make no progress. Weepers not whiners we need.

Jesus cried for his people because they were blinded by their culture, they were blinded by their condition, they were blinded by their circumstance, they were blinded by their oppression, they were blinded by being in a spot where they desired revenge, and they could not see the things that make for peace. So, Jesus wept. (Jeremiah Wright).

## **Jesus Weeps**

Jesus wept. But there's something else: Jesus weeps. Jesus weeps over a world that doesn't know what makes for peace. Look in the mirror: that's us. War does not make for peace. The world spends trillions of weapons of war, but we are not serious about peace. Will Campbell made a suggestion: Why can there not be a one-sentence peace treaty? "It shall be a violation of international law for any nation to kill a child of another nation." What nation would not sign the treaty? Ah, there would be plenty of no-takers. We are not serious about peace. We don't know what makes for peace. Hold up that one reality: Do not know the things that make for peace. Jesus weeps for the churches blinded by their lust for political power.

I still believe that the church matters. I still love this place, still believe every blame thing I ever learned here in church. If somebody in this house doesn't hear the weeping of our Savior, if somebody isn't moved, to sacrifice some time and thought and energy for our country's sake, then our democracy may not survive. It's that simple. Which puts the ball in our court. And I hope I am right about the staying power of the church.

## **This Nation Needs a Weeping Church**

On behalf of a broken-hearted Savior, I say that this nation needs the church. Not just any church. Not the church of nativism, patriotism, racism, homophobia. Not the accommodated church that has morphed into a secular institution. Not the prosperity gospel church. Not the church routinely set up as a strawman by puffed-up atheists whose excruciatingly fatuous descriptions of the church have no resemblance to any actual church.

Look, God still uses the church despite our struggles, flaws, and failures. I believe God is still present in churches as patriarchal, conservative, moralistic, self-righteous as a multitude of evangelical churches. I also believe God is still present in churches as open, liberal, and elitist as many mainline churches. The question is which churches will come to the aid of the nation?

What a mess. The United States of America is being torn apart by people who have no actual policy recommendations, no serious, substantive democratic deliberations. They are hellbent on getting even with people, calling people names, labeling people as enemies, calling people communists, creating anger and strife and dissension. As a world we are facing divisions we do not know how to heal. What's troubling to me is how many of our leaders do not want to have our alienation from one another

healed. What a mess! If our politicians won't rise and help, then the church must do it.

The nation needs a church that meets economic needs because of empathy and compassion and concern. The nation needs the faithful church – thousands of little churches dotting the landscape and filled with faithful, caring people who are always extending the hand of fellowship and hospitality to the stranger. Have you ever lived in a poor rural area of our nation? I have and I remain amazed at the level of care that people provide for one another. A short story tells records how a poor mountain people helped a single woman raise a child. They were so poor all they had to cut the Great Depression down to size was the choir singing, "By and By." Here's what empathy looks like: "All us natives took on our voted jobs. Some, during church hour, forked more hay into her barn; others would lift Zelene's hens and add eggs." "Sometimes, at the courthouse, I put down a little on Zelene's land taxes. Sometimes for her I turned back the scales at my store" (*The Christ-Haunted Landscape*). I'm saying the church needs a vision of all the Zelene's in this nation who need a helping hand.

The church, filled with individuals of unbelievable generosity and goodness, need to open their hearts to providing a government that encourages, lifts, helps, and cares for all the Zelene's of every creed, color, nationality. Transfer all that individual goodness into a political goodness. Jesus didn't feed one hungry man; he fed five thousand. Jesus didn't die for one woman; he gave his life for the world. This nation needs a church with a burning determination to meet the economic needs of everyone in need. "God has sent me to preach good news to the poor." Truly I stand amazed at the generosity of church people. Church people will give the shirt of their backs to help a needy person. I am asking them to transfer these deep feelings of empathy to the nation. The individual ethic of care needs to be transferred to the corporate level. Without removing a iota of evangelical zeal to "save sinners," I want to add the social gospel to our politics. The church for the poor, the immigrants, the widows, the orphans, the aliens. "Christianity is the faith of the poor."

### **Time for God's People to Come Home to the Church**

The churches need her people to come home. "A remnant shall return to the mighty God." That time has come. All those who have given in to despair and defeat – having hung your harps on the willow trees by the river Chebar, having lost your voice – now you can come home. You are needed. The nation needs you. The nation needs to see people who are trustworthy and credible. People will want to be in the same world with us, want to know

what we think and know and want to eat and drink the bread and wine with us. The nation needs people who have confidence in, take refuge in God. Come home! (Rowan Williams).

The nation faces a rising tide of hatred and anger. Come home to peace and joy. The nation faces a growing division where old friends have become harsh enemies. Come home to help reconcile the nation to one another. The nation faces a darkness that makes us unable to see the way to go. Come home to the light that shines in the darkness. The nation faces challenges to the core of our democracy. Come home to help us overcome stumbling blocks, injustice, oppression, and fear. I need your help. Will you come home to the church and let's get this nation work started? Will you come home? Come home.