

When Jesus Wept
John 11:1-44

Fourth Sunday in Lent/ 15th March 2020

One year ago this weekend we suspended in-person worship and closed down the church building (except for the Child Care Center, recovery groups, and the counseling center). We did it to “flatten the curve,” to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The global pandemic had arrived in the United States. Almost overnight, everything was rescheduled, postponed, canceled, or moved to an online platform, such as Zoom. Life changed quickly and it felt as if the world, itself, had come off its axis. We scrambled to figure out how to do everything from home: work, school, work and school. Fear and anxiety started to rise as we self-isolated ourselves to care for family, friends, and ourselves. In love, we separated ourselves from those we love. On March 15 we had our first makeshift prayer service from the sanctuary, which Susan Krehbiel recorded live on her iPhone. It was only going to be for two weeks, we thought, but then it extended to a month, then three months, and another three months and...here we are one year later.

And what a year it has been—it feels like ten years. It’s been exhausting. Facing enormous challenges, we’ve had to be creative, adaptive, and discovered silver linings in an otherwise terrifying situation. And the grief, sadness, and sorrow that we’ve experienced, both directly and indirectly—there are no words. The loss has been immense. No one has been left untouched. There’s the loss of lives: nearly 30 million Americans have tested positive for the virus (119 million globally) and more than 530,000 have died (2.6 million globally). These are staggering figures. In our congregation, we have lost three members to COVID and we have many members who have lost family and friends, and we’ve had many more members that have tested positive for COVID and recovered with little or no lasting symptoms. And there are other kinds of loss: the loss of senior year memories in high school and college, proms, parties, weddings, baptisms, long-anticipated vacations and reunions. We’ve lost a year of precious memories, experiences, and connections. Separated from those we love—parents, grandparents unable to spend time with children, grandchildren. Incalculable losses.

One year later, we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, thank God; but we still have a way to go. But thanks be to God for science—the fact that we have not one, not two, but three highly effective vaccines available in just under a year and that more than ten percent of the country has already been vaccinated in a relatively short time is nothing short of a miracle. An average 2.3 million vaccines per day are being administered.

It is important for us to honor our feelings. We must not underestimate how much we have carried and continue to carry in our hearts and in our bodies—whether or not we’ve been directly impacted by the loss of someone this year. We need to give ourselves permission to grieve, to lament, to cry—and not be afraid of these emotions, despite how unsettling or uncomfortable they make us feel.

Throughout the season of Lent, we’ve been asking the question: what does love look like? There are many ways to answer this question and we have only scratched the surface. This

week, given the somber anniversary that we are marking, it seemed like an appropriate time to remember that love can look like grief. Or, to switch it around, feelings and expressions of grief, of lament, of sorrow, even sadness, are directly related to love. We often grieve deeply because we love deeply. It's because we love and know how to love that we are graced with the capacity to grieve. If we track the feelings of grief and lament within us, they often to point something behind or underneath them, namely, what and whom we love. It's been said that grief is the price we pay for love. Or, to put it differently, grief is love that has no place to go. Either way, this we know: love and grief go together. I've known people (perhaps you do too) who are afraid to love, to invest fully in a person's life or situation, because they know in the end that person will one day die or the relationship will come to an end, and because they can't bear the thought of experiencing that loss and they pull back and refrain from truly loving them.

We see the connection between love and grief here in John 11, which recalls a time when Jesus was overcome with grief and sadness. We see here that Jesus' emotional response to death and loss were driven by something deeper, which was his profound love for Lazarus and his love for Mary and Martha who were in pain over the death of their brother. Yes, we know that Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb, demonstrating and pointing to the power of resurrection; it's about the promise of the resurrection. But we must not go there too soon. We must not run from the depth of feeling in this text. For Jesus shows us how to be human in the face of loss and that being human in this way is at the same time an expression of holiness, of the divine, the God who also weeps with us and for us. And so we discover, remarkably, that there is a kind of grace in our capacity to grieve and a grace that allows us to grieve.

In John 11, we find Jesus summoned to the home of Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus was ill, and then died, and was already in the tomb four days by the time Jesus arrives. Jesus enters a scene full of tears. Their friends who came to pay their respects are also weeping. Jesus comes upon a situation flooded with grief and sadness. Martha runs out to meet Jesus as he approaches; later, Mary, too, runs out to meet him. Mary falls her to feet and then even scolds Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn. 11:12). But now pay attention to what happens next. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (Jn. 11:13). When he sees their grief, it shakes and disturbs him deeply. "Deeply moved" is a flat translation of the Greek. It's really more like anger. The Greek verb here describes someone who is furious—even verbally expressing disgust or violent displeasure at something, even groaning or grunting at something. This is important to note because there is a deep connection between anger and grief. "Deeply moved" is deep emotion, emotion that causes one to shake, even shudder. Shaking and angry, Jesus asked "Where have you laid [Lazarus]?" "Here come and see," they said. And we're told, "Jesus began to weep." This verse, John 11:35, the shortest verse in the King James Version, should be read this way: "Jesus burst into tears." Then, "greatly disturbed" again, shaking, as Jesus approached the tomb, he said, "Take away the stone" (Jn. 11:38). It's his love and then his grief, his compassion, that sent him to the tomb, to confront death, to shout, "Lazarus, come out!" (Jn. 11:43).

This, too, is what love looks like. It is true, Lazarus' experience is unique and in many respects it's difficult for us to relate to it. But the love witnessed throughout this story, this we can understand and relate to: the divine love that weeps when we weep, that bursts into tears in

the face of *our* sadness and sorrow. Jesus' love meets us in our sadness and grief, honors our sadness and grief, and then chooses to do something about it, holding us in love. A love, the Scottish Presbyterian minister George Matheson (1842-1906) once described, that "wilt not let [us] go." Partially blind since the age of eighteen, Matheson was pastor in Glasgow and Edinburgh and wrote the poem and later hymn titled, [O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go](#), after a night of deep inner anguish and suffering, 6th June 1882. This poem/hymn emerged from his suffering, it flowed from his heart in five minutes.

*O love that wilt not let me go
The story behind the hymn
O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*

Matheson said, it "came like a dayspring from on high."¹

May we, too, trust and rest in the love that will never let us go.



COVID-19 Memorial, Washington, D.C.

¹ Ian Bradley, ed. *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go: Meditations, Prayers and Poes by George Matheson* (HarperCollins, 1990). Here is a very moving recording of the hymn by the Westminster Choir College, Princeton, NJ: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiZ9xXoZ1Mk>.