

Hard Tears

Genesis 15:1-18; Luke 13:31-35

I've only seen an important man in my life cry one time. It was at his mother's funeral. When his wife died we huddled together and he was very sad. But I don't remember him crying, at least not like at his mom's funeral.

The women in my life are different. One woman I know recently delivered just over 200 chocolate chip cookies to the Executive Director of the Inland Regional Center. They were baked by local high school students, an idea they came up with themselves. When this woman tried to explain to the Executive Director of the IRC why and how the kids baked the cookies she teared up, as did the woman executive director. The woman I know (well) teared up again telling me the story.

Although there's no explicit mention of tears, Jesus is in great grief as he tells of the unwillingness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to be gathered under his wing. N.T. Wright says the image is that of fire recalling the fire of Rome 20 years earlier from the writing of Luke that burned a quarter of the city in half a day. I'm told during a fire a mother hen will gather her chicks under her wings and will literally allow herself to be burned to death to protect the chicks from being harmed. Jesus has been trying to be that kind of mother to the baby chicks of Jerusalem. And they keep walking away while the fire rages. Their house of protection—Jerusalem!--has no place to go but up in flames.

Frederick Buechner is a novelist and a Christian. He draws our attention to the power of tears which I imagine Jesus shed in Buechner's book *Listening to Your Life*:

You never know what may cause tears. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it.... You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come

from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next.”

Jesus’ tears over Jerusalem led him to where he should go next—to the very place that killed the prophets. Jesus was no killjoy, no trouble-seeker or one who suffered a martyr complex. He only wanted to go (through Herod) to the place he was called.

In this season of greater quiet, of paying attention to our lives and God’s deliverance, Jesus’ own grief over Jerusalem is an invitation to see what really matters. It’s an opportunity to, yes, follow our tears, and keep at something even it doesn’t make complete sense. Jesus calls us neither to success or martyrdom, but to faithfulness of what’s before us and inside of us.

You see, Jesus had already figured out his destiny. Three times in Luke he had already said to his disciples, in effect, “this is not going to end well, but after three days there’s going to be a great reversal.” He orders his closest followers not to tell anyone. They don’t get it. Jesus chooses to follow his tears.

Yesterday an African American woman who was leading part of the presbytery in a workshop said she thought that racism would be gone by now. She thought the progress made through the Civil War, and then in the 1950’s and 60’s would make obsolete and passé the idea that race was some kind of determinate for behavior, intelligence or character. She imaged *privilege* as an invisible monster that blinds us in so many things--to what we have received from our parents, educators, employers, friends, faith communities and spouses. She asked us to pay attention to how privileged most of us truly are, and then to use that privilege for good.

Jesus saw the great privilege that Jerusalem enjoyed. They had prophets, they had the Instruction—the first five books of our Bible, they had all the wealth, knowledge and tradition on the land on their side. But it wasn’t enough. They wanted more, or were too hung up on what they already had. In their desire to not be content with what they had, and make use of it, they became blind to the God who only wanted their best.

What have you and I been given on a silver platter? Do we find ourselves saying to ourselves “it’s not good enough, I want more.” The letter to the Philippians says “godliness with contentment is a cause of great gain.” This season we are learning to be content, and to celebrate what we have, rather than looking around the corner for something more.

This is so hard in a culture that is constantly saying “need more, want more.” The whole advertising enterprise is built on the premise that you don’t have enough, and if you just have “x—whatever x is” you’ll be happy. And the way we’re being told that is getting smarter and smarter.

The other day I thought I had a coupon to buy some necessary clothes. I went to a website and started my order. I got all the way to check out, saw the large shipping charge and then saw that my coupon was for *in-store* purchase only. So I stopped my order before pushing the last button. There now appears on the borders of my email service and Facebook page all kinds of ads for things that I came very close to purchasing. There were even two ads for the same vendor when I was doing a google search, last night, for a prayer that moved me many years ago. How’d they find me?

I believe it was Sigmund Freud who said that the royal road to our unconscious is through our dreams. God is saying through the words and actions of Jesus that the royal road to our healing is through our tears. What makes us sad? What do we do with those tears? There are tears to be sure that just come over us—a sight of an ocean, music and old shoes, as Buechner says. But there are other tears that tell us that something is really bothering us, either a part of ourselves or a situation that should not be ignored. As Sam Pierce, the founder of World Vision said, “Let my heart be broken with that which breaks the heart of God.”

Abram was given a sure promise—he would be the father of many nations. He would have an heir through Sarai, even though he was very old. But then we hear there will be reversals--enslavement, set back and pain. It is not a straight line to deliverance. There will be opposition and rejection along the way. Cooperating with our own healing is one of the hardest tasks there is.

But the word this Lent is sure. *Follow your tears.* The things that make you tear up really matter. That's the way God has made you. You are listening to your life, a life made in the image and likeness of God.

Some of us tear up at the strangest things: the sight of a flag in a parade, an expression of unity or solidarity, the hope of Christian unity, a memory that we thought had long past left our heart. There are some tears that come naturally. When I was going back and forth from Europe to the States when stationed for almost four years in Germany, I remember how weepy I was in the middle of the night when I could not sleep. I am told it can be the same way after heart surgery. Tears tell us something, something we must respect, honor and embrace.

I wonder if some of the divided politics and shock and sadness about our increased vulnerability isn't something we must embrace. We must not fake it, but neither should we wallow in it.

This past week I received a follow up call from a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance case worker. She wanted to know how I was after the events of December 2nd. I honestly didn't have much to say. I told her Session talked briefly of Muslims, evangelism, and inter-religious dialogue and our education committee will no doubt be recommending some kind of learning forum. But I told the PDA worker that we have pretty much gone back to life as we've known it. Tears are our best guide when they're close to the surface.

When I was a freshman in college 28 runners competed with 28 runners from the three other classes in a friendly, 100-mile race. (The victors got bragging rights and all the ice cream they could eat, if I remember correctly.) The race went through the night. The beloved retired chaplain sent the first year students a message, from a psalm, "Tears may come in the night, but joy comes in the morning." The dark night of our lives are often brought to use by choices other people make. They are not willing to change. If we listen to the tears they cause us and keep doing something with them, we *will* find resurrection. The path to Easter goes through the hard tears brought on by our Jerusalems.