

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Feast of All Saints – November 7, 2021
John 11:32-44

Sometimes, the most powerful statements are made with the fewest words. “I’m sorry.” “You’re welcome.” “I forgive you.” “I love you.” It is often said that the shortest sentence in all our Holy Scriptures is “Jesus wept.” Two words – the very simplest of sentences. Subject – verb. Of course, our translation of the gospel story from John containing this sentence is not quite so concise. What we heard this morning was, “Jesus began to weep.” Two additional words, yet the spare clarity of this remarkable action is still communicated.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus seem to be the closest that Jesus has to best friends. Their home in Bethany was often a home-away-from-home for Jesus and his followers. With them, Jesus seemed most relaxed, most human. And the love they have for each other is evident in how intimately and freely they interact with each other. When Jesus arrives at Bethany upon hearing the news of Lazarus’ death, both Martha and Mary speak with Jesus as only those who are intimate do: expressing their frustration and anger for his coming too late to heal their brother, all the more disappointed because they knew that he could have done it. On Jesus’ part, he receives their grief and anger, even while weeping himself as he suffered the pain of his friend’s death and the sorrow experienced by those he loved most.

At the tomb where Lazarus has been laid, Jesus tells the crowd to roll away the stone covering the entrance to the tomb. He offers a prayer expressing his relationship to the Father so that those present would know that Jesus was sent by God. Jesus then calls out: “Lazarus, come out!” and the man who has been dead for four days comes out from within the darkness. In a sign of God’s glory as manifested through his Son, death is overcome. Resurrected life may still be to come, but renewed, restored, and enlivened life may be lived now.

That the Son of God shed tears, just like us, demonstrates something important – that our sorrows and our very lives, loves, and relationships are precious in God’s eyes. Jesus not only values the tears shed by those closest to him but also responds to them with tears of his own. Jesus sheds these tears in spite of the fact that he will soon raise Lazarus from the dead, offering a foretaste of the time spoken of in Revelation when all things will be made new and every tear will be wiped away.

I think it is important to note here that Jesus doesn’t merely wield his power in order offer yet another sign pointing to his divine identity. Rather, he acts in response to real human suffering and actual human tears. Twice in this passage we read that Jesus is “greatly disturbed” and “deeply moved.” As one theologian imagined, Jesus’ own tears must have been still wet on his cheeks when he “cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’”

I’ve been thinking about Jesus’ tears lately, as the death toll from the pandemic exceeded 750,000 Americans this week. How many tears have been shed over the past 20 months – tears for those millions who have died of the disease in this country and around the world; tears for those exhausted medical workers who have worked double time for far too long; tears for those who have lost jobs, homes, and whatever meager savings they had managed to accrue; tears for the children suffering anxiety, isolation and educational set-backs; tears for the newly orphaned and the fearful and lonely. So many tears. So much pain. My heart has broken again and again – broken open to deepened compassion, heightened love, and increased communion with others.

Thankfully, our sorrow and tears are not lost on God. That, in the midst of our suffering, God is present with us and joins us in our grief – that our tears of suffering cause God to be “greatly

disturbed” and “deeply moved.” Our tears move not only our own hearts but also call God to action to restore that which has been lost, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to usher in a new creation in which every tear shall be wiped away. And we, too, are called to be more than onlookers in this drama. We are called to allow the tears of others to disturb our hearts and move us to loving action as well.

Together in Christ and with our hearts broken open, we can live fully into our holy identities as God’s beloved in the communion of saints. Today, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints – the day we rejoice in all the saints of the church, those known and unknown. The observance began in the 4th century as a feast commemorating Christian martyrs and later was broadened to include all saints of the church. In more recent times, this scope has broadened even further to recognize average and, perhaps, ordinary Christians – like you and me.

When I mention “the saints”, what comes to mind? I imagine that you, like most of us, think of what Anne Gavin Ritchie calls the “stained glass saints” – those depicted in glass windows and other artistic renderings with their serene or exalted expressions. Those who courageously faced torture and death for their faith. Those paragons of virtue who boldly spoke the truth of their hearts to power and may have suffered mightily for it. We admire them for their deeds and look up to them as perfected and selfless people. Yet I think we do them a disservice by our projection of perfection upon these flesh and blood people, because in doing so we distance ourselves from them and make them difficult to relate to. “Don’t call me a saint,” Dorothy Day said. “I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

But saints are flawed people; just like anyone else. And we respect our saints when we remember that they lived complicated and imperfect human lives. As Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren wrote this week in the New York Times, “Christians don’t remember these men and women because they were perfect. We remember them because, like us, they were broken, selfish and fearful, yet God wrought beauty and light through their lives.”

In other words, the saints of the church are all the members of the body of Christ – the great ones we all know, as well as everyone else who may be simply striving to achieve some measure of goodness in the midst of imperfect and fragile lives. A wise and eloquent priest I know wrote that “every one of us is a universe of hurt and hope, and beauty and burden, at once subject to this world and, yet, so full of God.” Every one of us. That means you and me; Charles; even Steve. That means the folks in the Safeway and those at home drinking coffee and reading the newspaper right now rather than sitting here in church. That means all of us.

We all have something to offer, and we all are invited to participate in God’s grand work of redemption of creation. No matter how selfish, flawed, unloving, and fearful we may be. Each one of us may simply begin the journey right where we are – there is no need for perfection before we begin. And we should take comfort that the saints are not merely figures from history, but are all around us, all the time. We don’t need to look to dusty books to learn about them – all we have to do is open our hearts to the individuals we encounter in our daily lives. When we enter into deeper relationship with others and allow their tears, their suffering, and their great love to break our hearts open – again and again – we follow the model of Jesus who showed us how to be fully human. To weep with those who suffer, comfort those who grieve, love and encourage those who are anxious, and allow the love of God to soothe our hearts and renew our spirits.

And if that sounds like big a task, the Feast of All Saints reminds us that God meets us where we are, saints and sinners alike, and despite our many contradictions, and makes good out of our messy lives. It reminds us that all of us, even the best of us, are in need of mercy and forgiveness. In the end, remembering the stories of the saints is not so much a celebration of perfection, but of God’s improbable love and grace.

Amen.