

November 1, 2009
All Saints Day
John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a
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FOR CRYING OUT LOUD

When did you last cry? And for how long? Was it at a tearjerker movie? A funeral? A wedding? After a failed marriage or breaking up with someone you were dating? Or were they tears of joy? Tears of frustration or exhaustion?

A research center in tears actually collects tears and studies them. Using onions and two-hanky movies they gather the watery tears and freeze them for later study. Here are a few of their findings. Women cry on average of 5.3 times a month and men 1.4. The average cry is six minutes. Men most often just get watery eyes when they cry and women produce flowing tears. And the reasons people cry? Half of all tears are due to sadness, 20 percent due to happiness. The rest are related to anger, anxiety and fear.

For crying out loud, you might be wondering to yourself. Why is this in a sermon?

Tears are prominent in all three of today's scripture texts. The gospel is filled with grief over the death of Lazarus. His sisters Mary and Martha are crying, their hearts broken. And their community of family and friends is shedding tears as well. But what is most remarkable is that in the face of this loss and the anguish of death itself, Jesus is deeply moved and weeps. Such an act leads many to say that in the midst of unfathomable suffering, God shares our deepest grief, weeping with us.

Have you ever had someone say to you, "Don't cry." Maybe the person means well and wants to comfort you. Maybe if you were a boy, a comment like that taught you that women cry, but not men. Or maybe the words reflected how uncomfortable we are with the tears of another. How helpless we feel when we see someone crying.

Isaiah gives us the vision of the day when God will destroy death and wipe all tears from our faces. The reading from Revelation gives us the hope that God will make all things new. That God will make his home among us and dwell with us. There will be no more mourning and crying and pain. God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

I don't think this means God is telling us: Don't cry. Rather I can imagine God holding us when we weep, wiping our eyes. In a death-denying culture that doesn't want us to ever appear weak or vulnerable, I wonder if we as a community can say that there is a gift in crying out loud.

It is on All Saints Day that we remember the holy ones, the saints who have gone before us, including those we love who have died. We have had no members of Holy Trinity die during the past year. But I am sure all of us can call to mind dear ones no longer with us, whose memory we treasure, whose presence we miss. We may recall the tears we shed at their bedside, at the grave, in the weeks after their death.

We may have learned that grief takes time. That it may surprise us and suddenly come over us like a wave. We may have learned that one loss seems to stir up all the other losses from our lives as well. And when we weep, our tears are for all the times our hearts have been broken and we have come face to face again with our mortality and the limits of being human.

There is a kind of surrender in crying. For me it is a holy moment, in which I am fully alive and fully human. In such times of letting go and release, rare as they may be, I discover I am most open and most grateful to life in its utter simplicity.

No wonder they say that tears are cathartic. Or that St. Augustine asks of God: why tears are so sweet to the sorrowful? We could say that tears are a kind of prayer, Made of water, we could call them a baptismal cleansing, our body's response to the dying and rising into which we are baptized. Or as one writer put it, tears are our ego's surrender to death. Our surrender to what some call God's will. Our surrender to what others simply call "what is." (Miriam Greenspan)

Isn't it interesting that many people find they cry in church? Sometimes we cannot even explain why. Maybe it's because here layers of bitterness and hurt are peeled away. Maybe it's because here we are honest about matters of life and death. That we can admit our need when our hearts are broken by the many losses that come our way.

And yet we sing. We sing through the tears. We sing of resurrection and hope and new life. We sing of the end of all tears. We sing of the God who weeps with us and who promises to make all things new. Or in the words of a liturgical text we will soon sing: *All of us go down to the dust but even at the grave we make our song, alleluia!*

On this All Saints Day we gather at the river, the font, to give thanks for the gift of baptism. And for the communion of saints, gathered in this place today, in churches all over the world, and in the great company of those who have gone before us and are at rest. As you receive the droplets of water on your body, think of them also as teardrops. Let them remind you of the gift of tears, the sacrament of tears for times of joy and sorrow.

And whether here or later, remembering a loved one or savoring the present moment, if a tear falls, or your eyes get watery, know that it is a holy moment. And give thanks for crying out loud.