

## **A TEARFUL RETURN**

An Ash Wednesday Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Luke 15:11-24

March 6, 2019

Now and again, it's not unusual for us human beings to break down and have a good cry. Crying is one of those unique characteristics that sets us apart from other animals. For some, shedding tears comes easily and often. For others, tears come with greater difficulty and so they come less often.

There are probably countless reasons why we humans cry. Kids cry when their feelings are hurt or when they cut their finger. They cry when mom leaves them with the sitter, or when the teacher scolds them for being disruptive in class. We cry during arguments, at the loss of a loved one, when watching a sad movie, or listening to a song. The sight of a daughter getting married may cause a mother or even father to cry. There are so many reasons why people cry – regret, empathy, joy, sorrow, pain.

The Biblical history of tears shows us Abraham crying over the death of Sarah, and Jacob crying over the death of Rachel. We find Joseph weeping when he is finally reunited with his younger brother, Benjamin, after many years of separation. David cried at the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, and also when he realized how grievously he had sinned against God. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and upon the death of his friend Lazarus. Mary Magdalene wept at Jesus' tomb. These are but a few of the many shed tears found within the pages of the Bible.

Despite numerous biblical examples of men crying, we American have often considered such tears a sign of emotional instability in men. Many boys were brought up being told that, "boys don't cry." And even though there has been some reconsidering of that position in our society today, it's still not easy for a man in leadership to honestly express deep emotions through tears and not appear weak. Personally, I think the willingness to shed tears publicly is more honest than holding them in, and it offers those of us who have shed many a tear to connect with them more deeply.

On this Ash Wednesday, perhaps you are wondering, what's all this crying about? Well, if these next six weeks of Lent are going to be a time of honest reflection, a time of true repentance, a time of turning our lives around so that we can turn more fully towards God, then tears are necessary. The prophet Joel reminds us of this when God uses him to call the people to repentance. "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." (Joel 2:12) Joel tells the people that there is a day of judgment coming, but God offers them an opportunity to repent with fasting and weeping, and then to return to a place of blessed communion with God.

Genuine sorrow is a necessary step in our returning to God. Joel emphasizes that this shedding of tears must be genuine. It takes sincerity and commitment to turn a life around. God is not interested in fake or insincere tears designed to manipulate others. God is not impressed by, "I'm sorry," or "sorry, not." Those were two common apologies I often heard from my children when they were growing up, and I was not impressed with them. If we for some reason think that God doesn't know the difference between true regret and fake regret, then we are simply fooling ourselves. God is only interested in the type of sorrow and tears that accompany authentic repentance and a change of heart.

And so the prophet Joel calls for a particular kind of weeping – the kind that genuinely leads to repentance. To repent is to make a conscious decision to turn your life around and begin to walk in a new direction. To repent is to make a sincere and definitive change in your life for the purpose of drawing closer to God, and becoming more fully who God created you to be. It's a turning away from the sin that is driving our daily lives, and turning towards God's will and God's way.

"Return to the Lord, your God," implores the prophet, "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (vs. 13) It's here we realize that the tears are not only a sign of sorrow over sin, but they are also an expression of joy because of God's goodness. We are invited to turn toward a gracious and forgiving God, not toward a vengeful and punishing God. Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In it, the prodigal goes to a distant country, where he makes one bad choice after another until he has squandered all his money in sinful living. After everything is gone and he is feeling totally desperate, he comes to his senses. He repents – that is, he decides to turn himself around. He heads back home to his father. The prodigal rehearsed his apology on the way and he expected anger and even harsh judgment upon arriving home, but instead, he was met with love and forgiveness.

God's forgiveness knows no boundaries. His joy knows no restraint. He runs to meet us, according to the parable. Our heavenly Father puts his arms around us. Kisses us. Welcomes us home. Lent is a time to come to our senses and to return home. A time to confess so that we can know forgiveness and new life. Like the prodigal son, we need to first realize the mistakes we have made, and then we can consciously make a decision to return home. It is by arriving home that we then experience the extravagant love and forgiveness of our Heavenly Father.

It's important to remember that the end results of our tears and sorrow is a changed life, a new life, resurrected life. "Rend your heart and not your clothing," (vs. 13) says Joel. Change your insides and not simply your outsides; make sure your weeping and mourning are part of a new walk, not just a new talk. What Joel really hates is hypocrisy – people who say they are repenting but who fail to turn their lives around – people who say they are sorry, but go back to living the exact same way as before the apology.

Lent reminds us that when we weep in the process of true repentance, we're actually crying the tears of new life. Psalm 126 says, "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy." In the gospel of Luke we are told, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (Lk 6:21) and at the Last Supper, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy." (Jn 16:20)

Tears and new life – they go together. And so, the Lord Jesus stands before us today inviting us to return to God. If you are truly sorry for the ways you have allowed sin to get in the way of you living a faithful life, know that this is a good place and now is a good time to repent and begin turning your life around. So, let us enter into a time of Holy Communion by confessing our sin...