

The value of tears (John 11:32-44; Revelation 21:1-6a)

Jesus acts in response to real human suffering and actual human tears.

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“Can I have a tear for my pocket?” When I was a child, my mother often asked me this question when I had been crying. As far as I can recall, I always answered yes. After all, my tears didn’t seem to be doing me any good, and they were only going to splash down onto my clothes or onto the floor otherwise. Having received my consent, my mother would rub her thumb across one of my lower eyelids—saturating it with brine—and then plunge it into one of her pockets.

Even after she had performed this same ritual half a hundred times, it still had the remarkable effect of slowing my stream of tears. It was such a bizarre request and action that it jolted me out of my sorrow. Why would my mother want a tear, of all things? And why for her pocket? Did it feel somehow incomplete if not regularly watered with human tears? Wouldn’t my tear just be absorbed, or forgotten, or washed away in the next load of laundry?

But I also felt that this recognition of the value of my tears was, more broadly, an acknowledgment of the sorrow I was experiencing and an expression of my mother’s love for me.

In Psalm 56, the psalmist declares to God, “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?” (56:8) God’s plan for storing tears seems more viable than my mother’s, but the rhetorical intent is the same.

God's esteem for our tears is an acknowledgement that our sorrow and our very lives are precious in God's eyes.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident in scripture than in this week's Gospel reading, where we read that Jesus not only values the tears shed by Mary and others 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.

The raising of Lazarus points to God's ability to overcome death, both in the soon-to-occur resurrection of Christ and in the still-yet-to-occur new creation. It also fulfills the purpose ascribed to it by Jesus when he prays that this miracle will enable the crowd to "believe that you sent me."

But this narrative also suggests another truth about divine power. Jesus does not just wield power in order to offer another sign pointing to his identity. 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." His own tears must have been still wet on his cheeks when he "cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"

Our world today is still full of tears—tears of children who have been separated from their parents, tears of parents who have lost their children to our epidemic of violence, tears of refugees forced to leave all they have ever known, and all other tears shed by the downtrodden and the marginalized.

Though we often fail to recognize and value those who sorrow, their tears are not lost on God. God's bottle of tears must be nearly full to the brim. But God does not merely collect tears. The tears of suffering humanity cause God to be "greatly disturbed" and "deeply moved." They call God into action—to restore that which has been lost, to bind up the brokenhearted, to usher in a new creation in which every tear shall be wiped away.

And we are called to be more than onlookers in this drama, to do more than pronounce our judgment about which people God loves and whether God could have done more to prevent certain tragedies. We too must allow the tears being shed around us to disturb us greatly and move us deeply. We need to recognize the tears that God is collecting and shedding, and to choose to take part in God's redemptive and restorative activity on behalf of all those who weep.