

5th Sunday in Lent – March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are drawing near to the end of Lent. Only one more Sunday now before Easter. As I was mulling over this week's events, both near and far, the death of our beloved brother in Christ Frank Shupp, whose funeral we held yesterday, but then also the murder of eight women in the Atlanta area, I was wishing that we were in Year A of the lectionary instead of Year B. The Gospel for this Sunday in Year A is the story of the raising of Lazarus, and it contains the shortest verse in the English Bible (two words in the King James Version): "Jesus wept." In the NRSV it's translated "Jesus began to weep," or as my seminary professor rendered it, "Jesus burst into tears"¹ Usually this is understood to be Jesus being sad at his friend Lazarus' death. But some commentators have suggested that this was not so much about sadness as it was about frustration at the inability of even his closest friends and disciples to believe in him, to trust that God was doing a new thing in him, saving the world from its bondage to sin, death, and evil. I'm not sure of this take on the that short verse, "Jesus wept," but if not there then clearly in many other places Jesus showed dismay at his disciples' failure to understand him or his mission.

My thoughts were drawn in this direction particularly by the Atlanta killings after I learned that the perpetrator was a young white man brought up in a strongly conservative Christian church that singles out sexuality as a particular area of concern in the life of Christians, to the point, it seems, of obsession. Into that mix is added particularly strong patriarchal attitudes towards women that make them responsible for how men react to them, and blames them when they are harassed or assaulted. On top of that, there's the racial component of this incident, which still isn't clear as an overt motive. But as we learned in the Adult Sunday School study back in December and January, racism goes deeper than individual attitudes and intentions. It is baked into us and our culture. Like sin in general, it's not something we can free ourselves from, and it gets reinforced by how we talk about these kinds of crimes in our various media. When the perpetrator is a person of color, well, "that's just how those people are," we think. But when it's someone like us, we agonize over where he went wrong. And let's be real: this incident came to our attention only because one man killed eight women in one day. If he had killed only one, or even two for the same reason, I very much doubt the we would have heard about it at all, because these kinds of crimes are committed all around us on a daily basis. It's why we need that women's shelter here in town.

Our readings today on this fifth Sunday in Lent speak of a God who is pulling us in a different direction. The first reading from Jeremiah is the reading we get every year on Reformation Sunday about the new covenant God promises God's people, a covenant that is fulfilled, we believe, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. But I want us to notice something else about this reading. It is addressed to an even more patriarchal culture than our own, and the relationship between God and God's people is described in terms of a marriage covenant between a husband and a wife, a marriage covenant that has been broken. Adultery is the term for that, and the penalty for adultery in ancient Israel and Judah was death. This is where things stand between God and God's people as the kingdom of Judah is about to fall to the Babylonians, Jerusalem sacked, and the temple destroyed. Yet death is not to be the fate of God's people, in spite of their infidelity. Although by all rights God should abandon them, let them reap what they have sown, God instead promises a new covenant,

¹ See BDAG under δακρύω.

a renewed relationship, forgiveness that does not point the finger or dwell on past sins, but that instead renews the heart. Because this is a well-used passage, especially in Lutheran circles because of the Reformation connection, we can easily miss how radical this is. In the ears of its ancient audience, though, it would be immediately noticed that God is doing something very counter-cultural here, bearing deep hurt and profound shame. And shame in this culture was the worst thing imaginable. The expected behavior would be that God would lash out and utterly destroy those who have inflicted this shame. But God will not do so. The promise to Adam and Eve, to Noah and his family, to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and the Israelites, that promise endures, at great cost to God.

It is this God who in John's Gospel becomes flesh, who comes among us as one of us in Jesus Christ to keep that same promise alive. Things have not gotten any better between God and God's people in the half millennium since the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity, or between Jesus and his disciples in the three years he has been with them. Why wouldn't Jesus weep out of frustration at the state of the world?

Now, a chapter later, the world that God so loves shows up at Jesus' door in the person of some Greeks. These are Gentiles, non-Jewish people who have taken an interest in Judaism and who now take an interest in Jesus. This serves as Jesus' signal that it is "show time," time to be "lifted up" for the world to see God now taking the sin of the world upon God's self on a cross in order to make good on that promise made through Jeremiah, and calling us to follow in his footsteps.

This is where this Gospel text ruffled some feathers at On The Way last Monday evening. "Those who love their life will lose it," says Jesus, and "Those who hate their life will keep it." "I love my life," one of us said, "and this text worries me." You might be thinking the same thing. I think it helps to realize that the word love in the Bible is much more about action and much less about feelings than in our use of the word. And similarly, the word hate here is not about feeling miserable, but really about disregarding oneself in favor of others. So what Jesus is saying is that if you put all of your energy and attention into yourself, into your own wants and needs, if you try to make the world revolve around yourself, you miss out on what life is really about. If instead you take the focus off yourself and begin to care for the world around you, you will find the life that really is life, the life that God has intended for us all along.

But since, left to our own devices, this shift in focus is quite beyond our capabilities, Jesus takes the task upon himself. He will be the seed that is planted into death in order to bear the fruit of life and love, and in doing so, he will draw us to himself to take us along on the ride. Baptized into the death of Christ with our brother Frank Shupp and all the faithful of every time and place we are also baptized into Christ's resurrection and new life.

This is the trajectory that we are on as the baptized people of God, and it is to this promise that we cling and toward this goal we press. But in the meantime, there remains much to weep about, both in sadness and in frustration. And so, buoyed by the promise of our baptism and encouraged by the power of the Holy Spirit, God turns our focus onto the suffering, sinful, hopeless world to make us agents of hope, renouncing selfishness and hate, disregarding privilege and power, and opening our lives to the world that God loves.

As we move into these final weeks of Lent, may God continue to work God's love in and through us, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.