

The Gifts of Lent: Compassion The Tears of Jesus

John 11:1-45

Network Conference in St. Louis. Whenever I attend conference like this I often come away with ideas that are raised for me and things to ponder. My appreciation for the staff, for example. We have pulled together one of the most talented group of people anywhere – whether paid or volunteer – and Mike, Kathy, Brian, Carey, Bill, Gary and Paul do so much to make this organization function well. Thank you.

Another thing that struck me is that caring requires good communication. If we are not communicating our caring effectively, others won't know that we care. If we don't learn the ways that others receive information, they won't always receive the message we are trying to send. We are a church full of passion – **some would call it drama and they may be right** but I think passion is a better way to encapsulate the experience. There is just something that happens when we all get together. I saw it in St. Louis and most MCC gatherings and I see it here as well. In other denominations, people come to church and they are very reflective. I know some of you have wondered why it is not quiet before worship. I understand that some people need that but I also get the DNA of MCC and there is just such a kinetic exuberance about being together that there isn't any way to keep us silent so we busily visit and hug and greet one another. It can be quite noisy and boisterous. Some have interpreted that noise as not taking church seriously but I think the truth is just the opposite. We are so glad to be together that the room almost can't contain it at times. Yes, there are times we need to be quiet – and we will do that as well, even today – but it is very clear that our “coming together” time just isn't going to be one of those. So let's embrace our exuberance for caring boisterously... and let us find times in the midst of worship where we can embrace the stillness and quiet as well. Does that sound reasonable?

The other insight I received about communication last weekend is **that if people don't know information about something, then they make up the**

answer from bits and pieces that may be way off base. Let me give you an example of what this looks like. Are you familiar with gossip? Gossip is the act of giving information to someone who isn't involved and can't do anything about it. The reason why gossip is so appealing is that all of us (on some level) secretly enjoy getting the dirt on somebody else sometimes. It feels very powerful to have information – whether it is true or not doesn't seem to matter to lots of people. We just like having the power. The problem with gossip is that it doesn't solve anything. It simply perpetuates a cycle of titillation, secrets and power. Here's how it looks. This is just made up so this isn't a real problem. Suppose someone came to you and said, "I don't think Pastor Paul likes doing weddings. My partner and I want to get married but we don't know if he would officiate. *I have heard* that he wouldn't marry other people." Wouldn't that be a juicy bit of information to have? Now, what often happens with a bit of gossip like that is the receiver goes to someone else with, "Have you heard?" I've got the power because I have information and it is a zinger. And the cycle continues. The other way to handle that situation is to ask, "Have you talked to Pastor Paul about that? That's not my experience of him, would you like me to go with you to talk to Pastor Paul about that?" Well, that's no fun. There's no more juiciness if we have to talk to the person who can actually do something about it. But if you really want that wedding (and not just spread gossip), this would be the way to make it happen. AND the cycle of titillation, secrets and power is broken.

This is one of the reasons I love the way John's gospel tells the story of Jesus. There is no conspiracy of secrecy like we find in other gospel writers, most notably, Mark, where people are instructed to keep things quiet. John contains no examples of Jesus speaking in parables. There are no riddles to be solved or juicy gossip to spread. Jesus does his work in the full view of the community. The communication of the story is part of the way John's gospel shows God's care for the world – straight forward, clear without hedging. Today's story is the seventh and most spectacular "sign" that Jesus performs in his public ministry.

The story reveals the full range of Jesus' compassion. He is passionate for what he does and who he is. He lives his life to the fullest – from

caring for his friends, to paying attention to the vulnerable to confronting power. He loves Lazarus who has died. This story is the only example we have into this side of Jesus' compassion. Why would Jesus cry? If we are biblical literalists it would be clear that Jesus knows he can raise the dead, so Lazarus isn't gone for long. So that shouldn't make Jesus cry. This is another example of how a literal interpretation of these stories sends us on a rabbit's trail. Jesus loves his friends. Mary, Martha and Lazarus have been through so much with him. They have stood with him during the tough times and the good. It breaks his heart that Lazarus endured such a painful illness and death. It breaks his heart that Mary and Martha are so devastated by the loss of their brother. And it breaks his heart that all this time he has lived with them, taught them, loved them, eaten with them, visited with them, stayed with them – and they still haven't understood his compassion. Had he failed to communicate it effectively? Why was it so hard for them to see him as he was, not as they wanted him to be? What were the barriers and filters that they were using that clouded their mind and obscured the truth of who he was to them? And if it was this difficult for those who actually lived and knew Jesus personally, what chance do the rest of us have who only have these stories to rely on to grasp who Jesus really is?

They thought they had it figured out. "If you had been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died." That makes sense, right? Martha and Mary thought that is how this faith thing worked. Say the right incantation and nobody dies. Use the right prayer and everything is fixed. Follow all the rules and you get what you want. Belong to the right group and you get the inside track. And Jesus wept.

The tears of Jesus were for all of us – in all the ways that we try so hard and still misunderstand – for all the ways we feel our passion boldly and still injure those we care for – for all the ways we try to take short cuts in our relationships and shortchange the hard work of being present with each other's pain. Compassion doesn't mean that you can make someone else's pain go away. **It simply means that you are willing to be present with them while they go through it.** It is a hard place to be. **We are much better** at doing busy work. **We are much better** at figuring out the formulas so that we avoid the pain altogether. **We are much better** at

being anywhere else than in the uncomfortable spot where grace is the only thing that can bring healing. Do you know what I'm talking about? Sometimes the wilderness moments – the inhospitable places, the uncomfortable situations – are exactly the places where God is asking us to abide for a season. Stay here a little longer, the tears of Jesus plead. Risk feeling the pain of those you love. Risk caring about what is happening, even if you can't fix it. Risk being present while I grieve or rage or fear or mourn. Jesus wept because he was present in Mary and Martha's pain with them. **What greater gift can we give each other but our tears** – our tears of joy at birth, at accomplishment; our tears of pain at loss, at death; our tears of compassion when we see the one we love implode or choose unwisely? If you want a clear way to communicate your compassion for another, be present with them – no judgment, no unsolicited advice, no attempt to take their pain away – simply be present. It is one of the most profound gifts Lent has to teach us.

Sources:

www.homileticonline.com The Emoticon Gospel, April 2011.