

"Moved To Tears"
Palm Sunday Sermon
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
March 29, 2015
(Lk. 19:28-44)

Introduction.

When was the last time you had a good cry? What were the circumstances, and what led to your tears? Was it a fight with a family member or a friend? Was it when your boss told you that you no longer had a job with the company? Maybe it was at the funeral of someone you loved. Or perhaps you heard a song that reminded you of a special time from your past, and the memory brought tears to your eyes.

Back in January, the day after Lorie was diagnosed with cancer and before we had really told anyone, I was driving to a friend's house to deliver something. The thought of the prospect of losing Lorie overcame me and I sobbed so hard I couldn't see the road. There are times in our lives when we are overcome with emotion, and the tears just flow. Did you know that human beings are the only animals on the planet who express emotion through the shedding of tears?

As a young person, I was afraid to cry. I can remember being so embarrassed in the 7th grade the day I cried in front of the class when a teacher scolded me for something. I can also recall my embarrassment when I cried as I broke up a fight between my brother and another kid when we were growing up.

But since the death of my father the year after I graduated from college (a time when I cried a lot), I have grown to understand that shedding tears is one of the healthiest things a person can do. An analysis of tears reveals that not only do they contain salt but also toxins, and tears are a way of getting both the pain and the toxins out of our *lives*, not just our *eyes*.

Nowadays I tear up often—like when I see the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. Or when Andy Griffith has one of those moving father/son talks with Opie on TV. Or when I think about my parents and wish they were still alive. I have a friend who says of his wife, "She cries at the grand opening of grocery stores!" Some of us are just more emotional than others.

Jesus was a man who wasn't afraid to cry. The passage before us this morning tells of a time when Christ was moved to tears. It marks the beginning of Luke's narrative of what has come to be called the Passion Week, and it is followed by Luke's account of the Resurrection.

Up to this point in his record of the gospel, Luke has described what Jesus had been doing in the region of Jericho. From Jericho He and His disciples started to make their way toward Jerusalem, stopping over in Bethany. They probably got there before sunset on Friday, stayed the next day for the Sabbath, and enjoyed a dinner given in Jesus' honor at the home of Simon the Leper. The next day, Sunday, Palm Sunday, the Triumphal Entry took place.

I. The Plan.

Our passage says in v. 28, "*After Jesus said these things, He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.*" The text tells us that Jesus deliberately planned to go to Jerusalem. It was no accident. He picked the time and the place for His triumphal entry to the city, and by His decision He evoked a demonstration which excited the crowd but angered the religious leaders of

Israel. The people tried to make Him king once before, but it wasn't the right time. Now, however, it was time to show the world who He really was.

God had a plan. The apostle Paul wrote, "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons*" (Gal. 4:4). Elsewhere he writes, "*At just the right time,... Christ died for the ungodly*" (Rm. 5:6). The Bible says that before the foundation of the world, God had a plan for the salvation of humanity. Before the creation of time, the Lord knew what He was going to do. God had a plan then, and He has a plan for you now. He wants the very best for you, and He longs for you to seek His will that you might live in the center of His plan for your life.

II. The Errand.

In verses 29-31 we read of the errand on which two of Jesus' disciples were sent. The task was to get the colt of a donkey and bring it to Jesus. It was a special colt, one upon whom no one had ever ridden. God reserved this colt for a special, sacred purpose, and Jesus gave detailed instructions how to retrieve it. He told them specifically what to do, where to find the animal, and what to say if questioned. And the disciples were faithful to the task.

Have you ever wondered what it required for these two disciples to fulfill the assignment? It required at least three things. First, it required *faith*. They had to have faith that Jesus wasn't sending them on some wild goose chase. It also required *obedience*. They had to do what Jesus told them to do. It wasn't enough to believe. They had to act on that belief. And it required *boldness*. Imagine going to a strange city, untying a donkey that doesn't belong to you, and if asked saying, "The Lord has need of it." Right! It took boldness for these disciples to do what the Lord asked.

Faith, obedience and boldness. That's what it took for these disciples to carry out the errand given them by Christ, and that is what it takes for us today if we want to do the will of God.

III. The Entry.

Verses 35-38 tell the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. A caravan of pilgrims had already arrived in the city for the Passover. They had heard about the miracles that Jesus performed, the most recent of which was the raising of Lazarus and the healing of blind Bartimaeus. So the people came pouring out of the eastern gate of Jerusalem to meet Jesus. They wanted to see what He would do next.

We're told that they laid their cloaks on the road as Jesus went along, and John adds in his gospel that they cut branches from palm trees and waved them as Christ approached. That's why we have palm branches for our celebration today and why it's called Palm Sunday.

In Scripture, the palm tree was a symbol of righteousness and spiritual vigor because of its perpetual leaves and remarkable longevity (Ps. 92:1,2). Also, holding a palm branch in one's hand, along with the branches of willow and myrtle trees, was a way of expressing joy according to Leviticus 23:40. So this was a way of rejoicing in triumph that the Messiah had come.

The people quoted Psalm 118, one of the great Messianic psalms in the Old Testament. It was often sung during the Passover because it was a poem that talked about the Messiah who would come as God's deliverer. Clearly, the crowd saw Jesus as the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams to have the kingdom of David restored.

But Jesus wasn't the kind of king they thought He would be. Kings normally ride on a horse; Jesus rode on a donkey. Kings are associated with lions; Jesus was the Lamb of God. Kings

reign on a throne, but Jesus reigned on a cross. The Lord wasn't the political hero or the conquering military king they expected. That would come later, at Christ's second coming. This time He came as a Suffering Servant who laid down His life as the penalty for sin.

IV. The Tears.

Then in verse 41 we read, "*As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, [Jesus] wept over it.*" In spite of the exuberance of the crowd that day, Jesus knew what was really in their hearts. And He knew that just a few days later, this same crowd would call for His crucifixion, His death. He loved the people who would reject Him, and it broke His heart. So He wept.

A number of years ago I had a conversation with a colleague on the staff of another church who worked with college students, and we talked about this passage. He shared with me that one day while he was on campus, he encountered so many spiritual counterfeits -- a woman reading tarot cards, a schizophrenic prophesying something about the president of the university, and the brokenness of a student's life. And he cried over the campus.

Does your heart break over the things that break the heart of God? Do you mourn for the sins of others, as well as your own? Are you burdened for the lost? Do you care for the wounded and the broken? Does your heart break as you look around the world and see the pain, the suffering, the conflict, the children trapped in poverty?

Jesus went on to foretell the destruction of Jerusalem that would take place because of their rejection. He could foresee what was going to happen in the future. And His prophecy was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the city. The Jewish historian Josephus, who lived at the time of Christ, wrote:

"While the [temple] was burning, neither pity for age nor respect for rank was shown. On the contrary, children and old people, laity and priests alike were massacred. ...The emperor ordered the entire city and temple to be razed to the ground, leaving only the loftiest towers, ...and the portion of the wall enclosing the city on the west. ...All the rest...was so completely razed to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no reason to believe that the city had ever been inhabited."¹

Christ saw this judgment coming, and He wept for His people.

V. Bringing It Home.

In the Bible there is a deep connection between the head, the heart, and the will. Over the years Presbyterians have tended to lose sight of this, and we've developed a reputation for worshipping God primarily with our minds. We tend to have a cerebral approach to following Christ, and we like to quote Romans 12 where Paul said, "*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" But during his early ministry Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6 and reminded His followers that they should love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and strength, as well as their minds. He called them to a holistic approach to discipleship.

The mind isn't enough by itself. It's emotion that unlocks the will. It comes in a moment when we've become not only *convinced* in our minds but also *convicted* in our hearts that we've got to do something, and that's when we finally respond.

We have a crisis in our lives, and there's a problem we can't solve. That's when we turn to God. Or we travel to the Dominican Republic and see firsthand the devastating poverty. That's when we decide to sponsor a child. Or we learn about the problem of human trafficking and slavery that still exists around the world today, and our hearts break over the pictures we see and the stories we hear. That's when we write a check to support the work of International Justice

Mission. Or we see a homeless person who is freezing in the cold, and our hearts are moved to volunteer to spend a night at the Overflow Shelter.

Jesus' tears moved Him to do something. They prompted Him to lay down His life as a sacrifice for sin and bring redemption to a lost and broken world. His tears were more than a feeling. They unlocked His will, and these tears led Him to put His life on the line.

A man who has been moved to tears over the pain of this world, and as a result has done something about it as well as anyone I know, is Wes Stafford, the former president of Compassion International. He was raised in Africa as the child of missionaries, and, tragically, he was physically and sexually abused by the adults who ran the boarding school for missionary children he attended while he was growing up in the Ivory Coast.

But God used the awful events of Wes' early life not only to break his heart but also to make him a passionate advocate and champion for children in poverty and children of abuse all around the world. Out of his pain, Wes has given his life to reach the most vulnerable and weakest members of the human family, and he has rescued literally millions of children from poverty. Whenever I hear Wes speak, at some point in his message he is overcome with emotion and breaks down and cries a little. You see, for Wes it's personal, and it comes from the heart, not just his head.

I heard him tell the story of the time he was working with Compassion in a poor slum in Haiti. An epidemic of measles had swept into the community and was stealing the children one at a time. He held a tiny six-month-old baby in his arms the last day he was there. So small, so vulnerable, so sick. The baby wore no diaper, just a pair of blue underpants. It had yellow smiley faces on it, but no one was smiling in that house. The baby's mother, in desperation, handed his tiny withered body to Wes, hoping something, anything, might change his certain fate. Maybe the touch of a stranger would make a last-minute difference.

Wes cradled the child in his arms as he prayed and wept helplessly, and he watched the baby's rib cage rise and fall. The limp little boy gave a tiny shudder...and then went still and died in Wes' arms. The baby's mother, watching anxiously, fell sobbing against Wes's shoulder. He said he will never forget the anguish of her cry. And it's one of the things that motivates him to try and make a difference for the children of the world.²

When our hearts are broken with the things that break the heart of God, we're never the same again. It takes us to a new place, and it sends us in new directions. We decide to get involved ourselves and do something about the situation. What about you? Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?

Conclusion.

Recently, I read a news report about a woman who hadn't shed a tear in 18 years. The reason for her dry eyes wasn't emotional; it was physical. Doctors said she was the victim of a rare condition called Sjogren's syndrome. For some unknown reason, antibodies attacked her tear glands as if they were unwanted foreign organisms, and she can no longer cry. The tennis player Venus Williams battles this same disease.

This story reminds me of a spiritual problem I believe some people who follow Jesus have. They're people who could and should cry, but they don't. They see the needs of people around them, they are aware of the brokenness of the world, they're in touch with their own sin, but they don't do anything about it because they really don't care. I believe we all need to learn from the life of Jesus who cared so much He was moved to tears and moved to action.

I know people differ in the way they express their emotions, but literal tears aren't the real issue here. What's important is the attitude of the heart. The question is how deeply we sense the implications of our problems and the problems of the world, and how much we are affected by the brokenness around us. Are we filled with Godly sorrow? Are we pained by the tragic consequences of the poor choices people make? Do we feel some of the same sorrow God feels about evil? And are we willing to turn from it? Or do we simply have dry eyes?

The late Robertson McQuilken once said, "We see heaven more clearly through the prism of tears."³ I think he's right. May your heart, and may my heart, break with the things that break the heart of God, and may we be moved not only to tears, but also to action to do something about it. That's what Jesus did that first Palm Sunday long ago. Amen.

¹Josephus, *History of the Jewish War*, books VI.271, VII.1-3.

²Wes Stafford, taken from *Too Small To Ignore*, p. 242.

³Robertson McQuilken, *Leadership Journal*, Fall 1993, p. 128.