

“Tears of Sorrow, Anger, and Action”

John 11:1,4-6,17-53

March 29, 2020

I love teaching confirmation classes. Our middle school and high school students always have some interesting insights when we look at different stories in the Bible, they amaze me at what they remember at times about my sermons, and they always have excellent questions that keep me sharp and on my toes at all times. Every year I ask our third-year students to pick a verse from the Bible and to write a one page paper on what that verse means to them in preparation for their confirmation day. The verse that they pick then serves as their confirmation verse and I ask them to memorize it. Many students pick verses such as John 3:16 - “For God so loved the world that he gave His only son that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” Other students will choose John 14:6 where Jesus says – “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Some students have selected John 11:25 from our Gospel reading for today that states – “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.’” Many of you may remember your confirmation verse. Mine was Romans 1:16 and it states, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

Many people will often have their confirmation verse read at their wedding or their funeral. But every now and then I get some students who, when they hear that they have to memorize their confirmation verse, they try to find a short verse in the Bible. One year I actually had someone pick John 11:35, which is also from our Gospel lesson for today. It is the shortest verse in the Bible. It consists of only 2 words – “Jesus wept.” That’s it – “Jesus wept.” I told the student that he should probably choose a different verse. After all, while it is easy to memorize, you probably don’t want that verse read on your confirmation day. I don’t think your parents want to hear on a great day of joy and celebration, “Jesus wept.” I just don’t think that would be very fitting for the occasion, and the student agreed. And He picked out another verse that was perfect for the day.

At first glance, those 2 words of John 11:35 don’t look like much. The other verses that most students select for their confirmation day usually tell us a lot about Jesus and what He did for us, or they serve as inspirational words that may bring hope, comfort, and joy to people. John 11:35, “Jesus wept,” just doesn’t seem very inspirational. I don’t think anyone would want that verse read on their wedding day, but it certainly can be appropriate at a funeral, because those words describe what Jesus did when He learned about the death of his friend Lazarus.

Lazarus was a disciple whom Jesus loved. Jesus even called him a “friend.” Yet when Jesus gets word that Lazarus is sick, what’s odd is that He doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to go and see him or heal him. Finally, when Jesus does arrive at the home where Lazarus was staying, it’s too late – Lazarus has died and has been dead for 4 days. Sadly, it even seems like Jesus gets blamed for the death. Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, who both loved Jesus, each said to him on separate occasions in this text, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Therefore, perhaps overcome by grief and sadness over the death of a loved one, Jesus – as a human being – and just like any human being, wept. Even the Jews who saw Him with tears said in the next verse, “See how Jesus loved him.”

On the other hand, there could also be a second explanation for His tears. When Jesus arrived and saw people weeping, Verse 33 says that He was “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” Some people were even curious about His tears and asked, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” There answer is of course, “Yes,” but Jesus knows that sin destroyed God’s perfect world and the punishment for sin is death. Therefore, Jesus did not prevent death, just as He still does not keep people from dying today. But the Bible tells us that Jesus came to this earth to bring life, which suggests that Jesus not only wept tears of sympathy and sadness over the death of a friend, but also tears of righteous anger over the cruel and sad result of sin.

Whenever we, as a church, hear about the death of a child or young adult or a parent with young children, people will often shake their heads in sorrow and anger, and say, “This is just not right.” And that is true, death was never part of God’s plan for this world.

Therefore, the words, “Jesus wept,” not only sound like words of sorrow, but knowing what Jesus was going to do, that He was going to bring Lazarus back to life, they also sound like words of resistance. When Jesus

wept, His tears announced that He stood against the ways of death. So the good news for us is that not only did Jesus weep tears of sympathy and tears of righteous anger, but He also wept tears of action. It was not enough for Jesus to simply weep over the pain of death and to tell someone, like we do, "I'm sorry;" Jesus came to give life and to make a difference in the face of death. This is one reason why, of the 3 virtues listed in 1 Corinthians 13, faith, hope, and love, that love is the greatest. Love moves people to action, and I am seeing that and hearing about that through so many of you during the challenging days as you care for your family and your neighbors. There's an old saying that reminds us of the action involved in love, it says, "You can give without loving, but you cannot live without giving."

When Jesus arrived on the scene, He knew exactly what He was going to do. He knew Lazarus would die. He knew God's power would be revealed by raising Lazarus from the dead. But most of all, Jesus knew that by raising Lazarus, He would set into motion the events that would lead up to His own death. In fact, right after raising Lazarus from the dead, it says in verses 45-50 that many people put their faith in Jesus, but the religious leaders of the land, who feared they would lose the great power and control they had over the people got together and decided, "It would be better that this one man, Jesus, should die, so that the rest of us will not be destroyed."

Jesus knew this too, and yet out of His tremendous love for us He chose to undergo death so that we could live with Him in heaven. One chapter earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again."

The raising of Lazarus would lead to the death of Jesus, and Jesus knew it. So when Jesus wept, he faced the inevitability of his own death. By choosing to bring Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus chose to go into His own tomb. With tears of quiet commitment, Jesus gave the gift of His life to the world so we could live forever.

As Christians we know that God loves us by what He says here in His Word, but more importantly we know God loves us by His actions. Every Sunday, the one object we all see, without fail – on, above, and around our altar – whether you are here in the church or watching from home, is the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, it says, "The message of the cross is the power of God." God's power was demonstrated when Jesus rose from the dead; but His love was demonstrated – was put into action – when Jesus willingly died on the cross for our sins. The cross is God saying to each of us: "I love you."

In this world, where many of you may be having difficult days and where it seems like things could get worse, knowing that Jesus will one day call out our names and we will come out of our graves, just like Lazarus did, fully alive - healthier and happier than ever, fills me with great hope. May God grant to all of us the faith that looks to Jesus every day for strength, comfort, and life, and believes in His promises that eternal life – an eternal relationship with Jesus, is ours today to enjoy forever and that's guaranteed.