

“Salt”

Sermon from John 11:17-37

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for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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When Jesus arrived in Bethany, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Since Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem, many people had come out to console Martha and Mary about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, while Mary stayed at home with the mourners. When she got to Jesus, Martha said, “If you had been here, my brother would never have died! Yet even now, I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask.”

“Your brother will rise again!” Jesus assured her.

Martha replied, “I know he will rise again in the Resurrection on the last day.”

Jesus told her, “I am the Resurrection, and I am Life: those who believe in me will live, even if they die; and those who are alive and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes!” Martha replied. “I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, God's Only Begotten, the One who is coming into the world.”

When she had said this, Martha went back and called her sister Mary. “The teacher is here, asking for you,” she whispered. As soon as Mary heard this, she got up and went to him. Jesus hadn't gotten to the village yet. He was at the place where

Martha had met him. Those who were there consoling her saw her get up quickly and followed Mary, thinking she was going to the tomb to mourn. When Mary got to Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "If you had been here, Lazarus never would have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the other mourners as well, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.

"Where have you laid him?" Jesus asked.

"Come and see," they said. And Jesus wept. The people in the crowd began to remark, "See how much he loved him!" Others said, "He made the blind person see; why couldn't he have done something to prevent Lazarus's death?"

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I didn't watch the confirmation hearings for Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first African-American woman nominated to be a Supreme Court justice. I didn't watch them but I did listen to them, and I could tell, as I was listening, that there were pieces I was missing out on by only hearing, and not seeing, what was happening.

I heard senators reference each other's posters and flow charts, but I hadn't seen them. I heard commentators describe Ted Cruz referencing oversized pages of Ibram X. Kendi's book *Antiracist Baby*, but I didn't have the visual for that cartoon prop in my head. It was only after the hearing that I saw the photo of the nominee, out of focus, while the camera zeroed in on her teenage daughter behind her, just beaming with pride as she gazed at her mom. And it was following another story

that I saw the pictures of this accomplished judge, in her blue suit, after enduring days of questions and accusations, many of them grossly unfair, with a single tear streaking her cheek.

It had come during a speech from Senator Cory Booker, when he told her that she belonged. That she was worthy of the seat she was being considered for. That this country would be better with her in it. And she cried.

Seeing that single tear reminded me of other public tears we've seen in the past few years:

Like when Emma Gonzalez, the senior from Majorie Stoneman Douglas High School, took the stage at the March for Our Lives event for six minutes and twenty seconds - the time it took a shooter to kill seventeen of her classmates - and in that time, she named them, she talked about what they would never do again, and then she just stood there, for the nearly five minutes remaining; she just stood there, perfectly still, except the tears running down her cheeks, letting that time run out while a nation watched her mourn, and protest, and call us to account, all at the same time.

It reminded me of other public tears, like what the photographer captured of the two-year-old girl in her red jacket and red tennis shoes and brown curls. She was framed in between her mother and the vehicle a border patrol guard had her mother's body pressed up against as he searched her. The two of them had started in Honduras, rafted across the

Rio Grande, and were stopped at the border and searched before they were put into a van and taken to a processing center. The girl's tears were born of fear, and came to symbolize the brokenness of the system she was caught in.

This Lent, we're talking about the elements that make up our lives and our bodies, the same stuff that made up Jesus's life, and his body - we're talking about how the basic humanity that we're all comprised of is literally the same stuff. The bread that nourishes us. The water that we need to survive. The mud that we come from, that heals what ails us. And today, the salt.

Did you know an average adult has about four salt shakers worth of sodium chloride in their body at any given time? We're all constantly losing it - it's part of our blood, sweat, semen, urine - and so we're also constantly needing to replace it. But salt - like the other elements we've talked about so far this season - it is part of who we are, part of all that courses through us. And when we cry, that elemental nature makes itself known once more.

Why is Jesus crying in this story?

He doesn't cry when he's in another town and gets word that Lazarus is sick. He doesn't cry when he's delayed a few days and can't immediately be with his friend. He doesn't cry when he arrives and is informed that his friend, the one he loves, they say, has died. He begins to get worked up when he sees

the weeping of the other mourners. But it's not until he's taken to the place where they've laid him that Jesus sheds a tear.

Is that when it becomes real? Or is it the rest of it, all built up, that finally breaks him?

Jesus is far away when he gets word that his friend is sick, and he doesn't come right away. And we don't know why. When he gets there, the friend's sisters - also his friends, also people he loves - both blame him for their brother's death. "If you had been here, he wouldn't have died." Both of them say it. They don't ask what held him up. They don't say they know he must be grieving too. They don't wonder aloud if he's got a plan, some trick up his sleeve to make things not what they seem to be. They just say, "You let us down. We counted on you, and we thought you were our friend, and you said you loved us, and you let us down." And he hears that, and then he sees the place where they've laid his friend, and he cries.

What does it mean to be in relationship with people, and to let them down? What is it fair for us to expect from one another?

These past years have given all of us reason to cry. And they have taught us about being with people, and not being with them, even when we want to be, even if we love them.

Lori Walsh tells the story of her daughter, Jane, who left for college in New York City the first fall of the coronavirus pandemic. They're from South Dakota. People asked her if she

was worried. She was. She was most worried - she confessed in this essay - not of any of the particulars of college or New York City or those sorts of things. She was worried that she wouldn't be able to be in relationship like she once was. This is what the pandemic has meant for us all.

She writes, "Yes, we're afraid of getting sick, of losing our jobs, of being intubated, of dying. We're afraid of what this moment in history tells us about our nation, our leaders, and that arrogant American exceptionalism we thought we didn't believe in, but it turns out we pretty much did. But what we're afraid of most is that the ones we love will suffer in solitude."

And she tells the story of a Wednesday night when Jane called her. She was in her dorm room. Jane has asthma and had been struggling with symptoms of an asthma flare and Jane and her mom recognized some of the symptoms, but some were new, and that was scary, and during the course of this phone call, it got to where Jane couldn't breathe.

And her mother told her, "Stay on the phone. Grab your inhaler. Get downstairs to the security guard of your dorm. Tell him you have asthma. Tell him you can't breathe."

And her mom writes, "Honestly, I didn't know if she would make it that far."

But she did, with the help of the security guard who tended to her; and the med students from her school came to stabilize

her, who sat with her in the ambulance while the ER prepped for her; and the nurses and doctors who isolated her, treated her, tested her for COVID-19.

And her mom writes, “I heard it all because she left her phone on. But for a very long time, she couldn’t hear me. She was alone, and I couldn’t get to her, and sometimes the thing you fear most is the thing that happens to you, and that’s just the truth.”

In our story - leaving aside the miracle that comes at the end, just centering here, in the relationship - in this part of the story, Jesus was on his own. He knew the pain of that, and more. He knew - he knows - Ketanji Brown Jackson’s tears of not being believed for who he was, not being trusted with the work he was born to do. He knows Emma Gonzalez’s tears, of watching people tear at each other, destroy each other, defend the violence in their midst instead of the past and future victims of that violence. He knows the tears of the little girl - he’d been on her journey, as one who faced danger, had to travel from home, had to hope he and his family could find a place to land where they would be safe and welcome. Even when Jesus was alone, he was in relationship with all of them, with all of us, with all that has ever been. Like we all are, always.

Maybe our tears are our own. Maybe they are mourning and maybe they are protest; maybe they are humiliation and maybe they are fear and maybe they are overwhelm and maybe

sometimes they are just what rises up in us when we realize how connected we are, each of us are to one another. When we come to understand the beauty and the promise and the terror and the responsibility of all of that.

Jane's mom writes that Jane was isolated for six days before getting a negative COVID-19 test result. That Jane slept a lot during that time. While they waited, Jane and her mom both stayed home, states apart. They worked when they could. They napped when they could. When Jane would lay down to close her eyes, she'd set her phone on her nightstand, on speaker, still connected to her mom across those miles, and her mom would listen to her breathing. She writes, "It was the best we could do, and so we did it. We are acutely aware that we might be called upon to do it again. We are grateful for every breath."

She writes, "Jane was alone for all of this, and she was never alone, in that way all of us are alone, and in that way none of us are ever alone, even during our darkest nights." She ends her essay noting, "We are all on our own journeys of courage and humility now. In solitude. And in solidarity."

And maybe we always have been. Maybe we always will be. What a gift, to be able to trust each other in that; to be invited to call on a friend who has known it, too, known those same tears; to be held by a God who is with us through all of it. Amen.