

“Jesus Wept”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

07 November 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: John 11:1-3, 17-35

John 5:1-9

“Jesus began to weep.”

- John 11:35

Prayer

God of love and compassion,

Speak to us again this morning.

Startle us once again with words that can

Inspire, comfort, enlighten, challenge and transform us.

May our hearing of your Holy Word

Draw us closer to you and

To the community of saints that gathers in this place to worship you

With heart, mind, soul and body.

O God, hear our prayer. Amen.

“Jesus began to weep.”

These three simple words from John’s Gospel are a gift to the Church Universal on All Saints’ Sunday. They are a gift to you and me as we unite our hearts with the hearts of Christians around the world to remember the saints of the Church, the very normal and unexceptional saints in our lives, who have died since All Saints’ Sunday last year. This Sunday is an important day on the liturgical calendar of the Church because in this ritual of remembrance, when we read out loud the names of loved ones, friends, neighbors, siblings in Christ who are dead and light candles to honor their memory, we affirm our hope in those ageless and undying words that Paul, the Apostle, penned in his letter to the Christians in Rome: ***“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***¹

At the heart of today’s brave and tender act of remembering is love. It’s a love that is too deep to allow us to forget. It’s a transcendental love that carries our hearts beyond the bottomless void of death. It’s a love that remembers not because it wants to cling to grief but because it has faith that God can press the crushing pain of loss into the freedom to remember with loving gratitude. It’s a love that stares at the intractable and inexorable reality of our human finitude and still believes that somewhere on the

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

other side of the Great Barrier between the dead and the living, the essence – some might call it “the spirit,” others “the life force” – of our everyday saints is collected like sacred fragments into the holy story of life that God has been composing since the beginning of time. Nothing is lost. No human story is forgotten.

Songwriter, poet and singer Libby Roderick put into words and music what is at the core of this day of remembrance in a song she titled “*Holy Thing to Love*.”

***“It’s a human thing, a holy thing, to love what death can take
It’s a human thing to love the thing whose loss will cause your heart to break
It’s a funny thing we can’t stop ourselves even as we wait for the final hush
It’s a human thing, a funny thing, a holy thing to love...
Have you seen how the world moves on? Every hand we touch will go
Every face we cherish will disappear, taking everything that we used to know
But somewhere deep inside our bones we must be tied to the morning star
For knowing that our hearts will break, we love each other all the more,
It’s a human thing...”²***

In our death-denying and grief-phobic culture where people spend every waking moment trying to shield themselves from the fragility of life, gathering on a beautiful fall day to purposefully remind each other that it is indeed a human and a holy thing to love another life whose loss will cause our hearts to break sounds like a morbid religious practice that is out-of-touch with the American spirit, which always moves on quickly from tragedy and pain back to the pursuit of individual happiness. Especially after all the personal and collective losses we have had to experience, witness, endure and suffer during the pandemic, our society has been eager to forget the dead in their graves and be excited once again about living without the burden of the painful emotions and feelings that COVID-19 thrust upon us. Our mortality ranks high among the topics most people would rather not talk about at all these days. Think of how swiftly we stopped paying attention to the number of deaths by COVID as soon as the vaccines became available. Even churches stopped ringing their bells or lighting candles or hanging banners in remembrance of the millions of lives lost in the pandemic.

Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the last century, said in one of his sermons that it is also very human to be existentially fearful about the transitory nature of our lives. “***Something in us,***” Tillich preached, “***rebels against death wherever it appears...We rebel against our own end, against its definitive, inescapable character.***”³ And yet, even if we tried to live, and many of us do, as if we could live forever and steeled ourselves against the reality of our own mortality, somewhere deep inside our bones we all know that our days are numbered and every face we cherish will disappear and our hearts will be broken because death, no matter how much we distance ourselves from it, is a natural and unshakable part of what it means to be human in this world.

You and I need rituals like this morning's name-reading and candle-lighting that connect us with the wisdom of the saints who lived, loved, sorrowed over death, cried, and rose from the ashes of grief to live and love all over again. All Saints' Sunday grounds us in this across-time-living-spiritual-wisdom that predates us and will outlast us. This ritual does not necessarily make the great separation from our loved ones, our spouses, from our brothers and sisters, from our parents and grandparents, from children, neighbors and church friends less painful or more bearable, but it creates a sacred space for us to say without holding back our tears that we have lost someone we still love, and our hearts are shattered into a million tiny pieces.

Kate Bowler, an associate professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School, was forced to confront her own finitude when, at the age of 35, she was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. Happily married to her high school sweetheart, the adoring mother of a baby boy and a young professional at the pinnacle of her career, Kate saw her world and her faith being crushed under the weight of a diagnosis that gave her only a few months to live. In her frank, irreverent, at times somber and always theologically relevant memoir that bears an intriguing title *"Everything Happens for A Reason And Other Lies I've Loved,"* Kate Bowler, whom, by the way, is still alive 6 years later, talks very poignantly about how she has learned to live while dying. In her memoir, she looks at the heartbreaking grief that death brings into our lives from a whole new perspective. Bowler wrote, ***"I used to think that grief was about looking backward, old men saddled with regrets or young ones pondering should-haves. I see now that it is about eyes squinting through tears into an unbearable future. The world cannot be remade by the sheer force of love. A brutal world demands capitulation to what seems impossible — separation. Brokenness. An end without an ending."***⁴

On All Saints' Sunday, the wisdom of the faith that nurtured the lives of the saints of the Church through the centuries carves out a holy time for us to name the unbearable separation from our loved ones. This simple ritual allows us to face our loss and our grief. On this day of remembering, we are given a safe place to acknowledge that the death of these saints we named and so many others who, I know you are holding in your hearts today, changed our lives forever. That final and inescapable separation took them away and their death yanked us from the lives we once knew. Here, in the presence of God, we can talk openly of our longing for John, Mary-Ellen, Janet, Cindy, Marilyn, Ebit, Merna, Peter, Clyde, Connie, Samuel, Bonnie, David, Richard and Howard. Yes! It's a holy thing to remember these saints and yet something in us would like to hear their voices, feel their touch, hug them once again and not have to accept a future where they will not be present, physically present, in our lives and in our church. I want you to know that it is a very human thing and even a holy thing to be sad, to cry, to be angry and upset, to scream at God, to show your vulnerability, to wail and to cry some more. Our grief, our tears and our remembering are the sincerest expressions of our love.

“Jesus wept.” This is one of the shortest and most revealing verses in the Gospel of John. As I said at the beginning, Jesus’ tears in this passage that Bridget read this morning are a gift to the Church on All Saints’ Sunday.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus. The Gospel of John says that Jesus loved them⁵ and often used their house as a retreat and as a welcoming place where his disciples gathered to listen to Jesus’ stories, parables, and teachings.⁶ Nowhere in the New Testament there is a passage that recounts an occasion when Jesus went back to his own childhood home to pray or meditate or visit his family, but we do know that these three siblings who were probably around Jesus’ age became his spiritual family. Amongst them, Jesus felt fully accepted. In their house, Jesus could speak about his mission openly and without any concerns that he might be misunderstood. Lazarus, Mary and Martha shared Jesus’ vision for a world transformed by compassion, faith, forgiveness, justice, solidarity, friendship and love-in-human-flesh. This is probably the reason why John dedicates so much space in his Gospel to the grief and trauma caused by Lazarus’ death.

Unafraid of coming across as too emotional, too sensitive, and too human, Jesus weeps when he comes face-to-face with the raw and undiluted emotions of friends that were closer to him than his own biological family. And Jesus does not grieve from the neck up only. John makes sure that we know that Jesus was **“greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”** by Lazarus’ death and by Mary’s and Martha’s tears of sadness. There is a visceral and spiritual reaction to the death of our loved ones. Their absence affects our body, our mind, our spirit, and our whole life. Jesus weeps because he felt in his own heart, body and soul the unfathomable feeling of separation from the friend he loves. Jesus weeps because he feels in his bones the fragility and transitoriness of human life. He weeps with Mary and Martha because grieving is a holy and precious part of being human and no human being should ever weep or grieve alone.

“Jesus began to weep.” I am deeply grateful for John’s courage to write down this cluster of words that reveal one of the moments when Jesus was most fully human. There is no question that the fourth Gospel – John’s Gospel – is the most beloved by the Church Universal. Some of the most familiar and cherished language the Church uses to talk about Jesus comes from John’s writings. In John, Jesus is the **“bread of life.”**⁷ **“The light of the world.”**⁸ **“The good shepherd.”**⁹ **“The way, the truth and the life.”**¹⁰ **“The true vine.”**¹¹ This morning, I am thankful that Jesus is only the grownup man who weeps. We may not talk about the weeping of Jesus in Sunday school or in the worship services very often and, for some Christians, his tears may be an inconsequential detail within the frame of a much larger story about the raising of Lazarus; still, I am thankful for this short Bible verse and the message it conveys to the Church. I am grateful that Jesus does not try to tame his grief. I am thankful that Jesus does not tell Martha and Mary to get over their crying and have faith in miracles instead. It is inspiring to see that Jesus was a man of emotions who didn’t make any effort to handle the pain of death gracefully. He was a human being who loved his friends. Jesus

was a person of faith who understood that sometimes all we can do when death makes our friends stare into their future through the unbearable tears of sorrow is to cry alongside them while holding their hands in loving and respectful silence.

In one of the moving passages in her memoir, Kate Bowler talks about the sense of hopelessness that came over her the first few days after the cancer diagnosis. She had to stay in the hospital, couldn't go back home, couldn't see her son, couldn't get out of bed and she was not sure if she would survive the year. Reflecting on those confusing and scary days, Kate Bowler wrote, ***"At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus."***¹²

In our grieving, we all need people who can mirror back to us the comforting and healing presence of Jesus. Clinical psychologists say that grief does not move in linear stages and each person grieves in their own very personal way and at their own unique pace. Still, there are times when death makes life too hard, when remembering becomes too painful, when our faith is ground to dust by our loss. In those dark and heartbreaking moments, it is important to reach out and not sit alone with our sadness, anger, despair, depression, anxiety or with the feeling that there is no hope in the future. Friends, don't ever think that your tears or your trauma or your pain are a liability to others, especially to your church. It is humbling to even think about it, but we are here to mirror the face of Jesus back to you in any way that you will allow us to do it.

I find it instructive that when Jesus spoke with the man who had been sitting by the pool of healing waters for thirty-eight years, he did not offer a solution for the man's condition right off the bat. First, Jesus noticed this person. Then he sat down next to this paralyzed human being and sensed the man's deep pain, his loneliness, and his persistent faith in the possibility that someday he might be the first one to jump in the water.

"Do you want to be made well?" This seems to be an odd question to ask of someone who is clearly still imagining a future in which he is no longer helpless, alone, trapped in his suffering, and limited by the circumstances of his current life. I suppose that Jesus knew that it was more important to give this man a chance to express his need for help than to tell him what to do. And it is only after the paralyzed man makes it clear that he hasn't given up on the hope of being made well; that despite the long wait, he hasn't walled out the possibility that someone might come along and offer to put him in the healing waters at the exact moment the waters are stirred up; it is only when the man tells Jesus that he is still willing to accept a helping hand that Jesus offers the man the chance to live in a future completely different from his past.

On this All Saints' Sunday, my prayer is that no one in our congregation will suffer or grieve alone. If your grief is overwhelming, I hope you know that the deacons, the Visitation Team, the Stephen Ministers, our Prayer Teams, Charlotte, Andrew and I are here to listen, to pray for you and with you, to sit next to you patiently until you are able to articulate your need and how we can support you. I hope that you will allow us to mirror back to you the face of Jesus in your time of sorrow and pain as much as you have embodied the love of Christ for others in our church.

Friends, it is a human thing, a holy thing to love what death can take, but, on this day of remembrance, may we also hold on to the words of the psalmist who said, ***"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones."***¹³ Despite our tears and sorrow, let us find in the timeless wisdom of our faith the strength to give thanks that the saints we named today are forever wrapped in the shawl of God's love. Let us pray for the hope that can push grief aside and to background so we can see more clearly how the memories of our loved ones are a blessing to us and to our church. Let us find the courage today to join our voices together and praise God ***"For all the saints who from their labors rest"*** and then go out into the world ready to love, weep, grieve, hope, care, live, die and mirror Christ back to each other.

I want to end this sermon with an invitation to prayer written by one of my favorite spiritual writers and living saints of the Church, the Irish theologian and poet Pádraig Ó Tuama:

"So let us pick up the stones over which we stumble, friends, and build altars. Let us listen to the sound of breath in our bodies. Let us listen to the sounds of our own voices, of our own names, of our own fears. Let us name the harsh light and the soft darkness that surround us. Let's claw ourselves out from the graves we've dug. Let's lick the earth from our fingers. Let us look up and out and around. The world is big and wide and wild and wonderful and wicked, and our lives are murky, magnificent, malleable, and full of meaning. Oremus. Let us pray."¹⁴

Holy God, thank you for the saints who were human enough to love us and faithful enough to seek to love you all their lives. We give thanks for the privilege of knowing and loving all the saints we named this morning. Our tears and our grieving are real but so is our gratitude for your healing love. Bring into our lives people who can mirror the face of Jesus back to us so we may never feel abandoned by you in our time of sorrow and pain. Grant that we may remember your saints without holding on to grief indefinitely. May the faith of the saints live in our hearts, may their wisdom light our path, and may we all be honored to carry on the ministries of healing love the saints kept alive in our church during their lifetime. Amen.

¹ Romans 8:35, 37.

² By Libby Roderick. "Holy Thing to Love," 1991.

³ Paul Tillich in The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 70-71.

⁴ Kate Bowler in Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved, p. 70 [Kindle edition].

⁵ John 11:5.

⁶ See Luke 10:48-32; John 11:1-45; John 12:1-11.

⁷ John 6:35, 41, 48, 51.

⁸ John 8:12.

⁹ John 10:11.

¹⁰ John 14:6.

¹¹ John 15:1.

¹² Kate Bowler in Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved, p. 121 [Kindle edition].

¹³ Psalm 116:15.

¹⁴ Pádraig Ó Tuama in Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community, p. XX.