

What Makes Preachers Cry?
A Sermon for Every Sunday, March 17, 2019
The Second Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:31-35

We're now in the second Sunday of our walk through Lent with Jesus. Lent, season of honesty about our sin, truth telling about the many ways we fall short of God's goodness. Lent, season of repentance and lament. Lament? Today when we think of mourning, it's usually in response to death or loss. Most of us never weep except at funerals.

Back in the days of American revivalism, when Christianity spread like wildfire across the American frontier, at most revivals they had what they called, "the mourners' bench." That was a church pew or a bench where repentant sinners sat long enough to think about their sin and to weep and mourn for their sin.

Today, we're more apt to mourn for the loss of someone we love more than we mourn for the ways that our sin, our rebellion, our infidelity, has caused God sadness.

What causes you joy? What moves you to laugh with delight? Old Abbot and Costello movies. When your favorite team wins a national championship. When the guy and the gal whom you were rooting for finally overcome all odds against them and fall into one another's arms and they go off to live happily ever after.

You can tell a great deal about people by what they consider to be humorous, funny, and delightful.

The converse is true as well. What causes you grief? When are you moved to tears? Your favorite team doesn't win the national championship. You don't get the job you know would be perfect for you. Someone you love is no longer there in our life.

Joy, laughter, delight are fine indicators of what we love and what we value but I believe that grief, tears, lament are unfailing indicators of what we value most, our most cherished people, our deepest loves.

My mother grew up as a veritable orphan. When my mother's mother died, her farm family was very poor and perhaps that's a reason that my mother was immediately, at age five, bundled off to live with a variety of relatives. However, my mother sometimes wondered if her father had sent her away because somehow he blamed her for the death of his wife.

In later life, my mother made attempts to get close to her father, my grandfather, but most of those were rebuffed. Though my mother was nice about it, we all could tell that my grandfather was not one of her favorite people.

Therefore my sophomore year of college, when my mother called to tell me that my grandfather had died, I was surprised (considering the history she had with my grandfather) that my mother was crying. Her tears were revealing (my mother rarely, almost never wept about anything).

I wondered, was my mother crying from a genuine sense of loss? Maybe she loved my grandfather more than I had thought. Perhaps she was weeping out of a sense of regret, sad at what might have been but now would never be.

“Why is my mother, who rarely weeps over anything, weeping for this father whom she barely knew?” I remember asking myself after the phone call. “Maybe that’s why she’s weeping – she has lost the father whom she barely knew.”

I don’t know if Jesus actually broke down and cried in this morning’s gospel. I do know that Luke says Jesus laments over the state of Jerusalem. *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that. Look, your house is abandoned.”* Matthew says, “Jesus wept” over Jerusalem. Luke doesn’t say Jesus wept but it’s hard to imagine Jesus uttering these words without tears in his eyes.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you! How often I have wanted to gather your people just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that.”

How revealing. Jesus is on the road out in Galilee, a long way from Jerusalem. But already storm clouds are gathering. “Herod’s out to kill you,” warn the Pharisees. Jesus has a premonition of the rejection that he will suffer in Jerusalem, the capital city.

They tell Jesus that Herod, most powerful man in all Judea, is out to kill him. Jesus just brushes it off, dismissing Herod as nothing but a “fox.” But then Jesus falls into lament, grief, mourning, not over Herod’s plans for him, not over his eventual fate in Jerusalem, but over the state of Jerusalem itself.

“Oh Washington, Washington. What high hopes I had for you. With what promise you began this century. And now, look how you have squandered your future. See how you have disregarded the judgments of God.”

I wonder if it was something like that.

Jesus speaks of Israel's prophets. Who were Israel's prophets? Spokespersons for God, human beings who were given unusual insight into God's purposes. A consistent message of the prophets was, "God delivered you from Egyptian slavery. God made out of you a great people. Look how you squandered your inheritance. Look how you broke God's covenant with you."

Prophet Jeremiah said he wished that he had a river in order to shed all the tears that arose in him over the state of God's people.

The prophets were willing to call even the powerful into account, reminding kings and high priests that they served under a just and righteous God who would hold them accountable for their abuses of power, particularly their abuses toward the poor and the vulnerable.

Sometimes the powerful people heeded the prophets' warnings and judgments and sometimes they ridiculed, ignored, and dismissed those judgments. Maybe Jesus has the prophets on his mind because of Herod's threats against him. That's the way the powerful have often reacted to the judgments of God.

And it's enough to make Jesus weep. Jesus laments what might have been. He laments that the people and their rulers have sunk to replication of the worst aspects of their history rather than following their better angels.

Lent has traditionally been a season for repentance. The church gives us forty days to mourn all the ways that we have disappointed ourselves and disappointed our God with the way that we have lived, the things that we have done and left undone. And,

when you look at the state of our lives, as well as our nation, our world, there is much to mourn.

But our gospel lesson today is not about our grief or our tears. Presumably, there were lots of inhabitants of the capital city, Jerusalem, who went about with happy faces. They believed in putting a good face on everything. Things were going well for them and their families. Why shouldn't they rejoice?

And Jesus looked at Jerusalem the golden and....wept. He had come to gather all to himself, like a mother hen gathers her chicks. And yet we responded to his open handed love with cries of "Crucify him!"

I'm not going to attempt to give you my chosen list of subjects for lamentation. I could, because I think there's a long list of ways in which we have caused God grief. Here's what I want you to do: I want you to take just a moment and ponder, if Jesus thought about our town today, would he rejoice that we have been faithful to his way, or would he lament, "You have rejected and derided those prophetic truth-tellers who dared to call you to account and tell you the truth. I wanted to gather you close to me, as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you wouldn't. Now is the time for tears."

Back when I served as Junior High rep to the Official Board of Buncombe Street Methodist Church, Billy Graham announced a city-wide crusade in our town, little Greenville, South Carolina. The whole town mobilized. Every church in town was canvassed for their support. At the church's board meeting grownups debated our congregation's participation. Our preacher told the board what a great opportunity this was for our church, for our whole town. Billy Graham! Our preacher said that he had

been meeting for the last few months with a group of clergy from other churches in town and rarely had he witnessed such excitement.

The board was having none of it and refused to rejoice with our pastor at the prospect of the citywide crusade.

“Bunch of Baptists trying to get a leg up on us,” gasped one.

“Graham says that there will be no separation of the races during the meetings.” That did it. The board voted to protect our church from Grahamesque miscegenation and racial mixing and refused participation.

After the meeting, as I exited a side door to catch the legally racially segregated Greenville bus to go home, down a dark church hallway I heard weeping. I crept down the hall. Light shown from an open door. I peeked in. Our pastor, Dr. Dubose, was sobbing, holding his head in his hands. Keeping up with the disruptive movements of a righteous God is not for the faint of heart.

I thank God that at an early age I got to see what makes preachers cry.

—*William H. Willimon* © 2019