

Text: John 11: 17-44  
Title: Thoughts and Prayers  
Date: 02.18.18  
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I went home with an ashy smudge ~ faintly in the shape of a cross ~ on my forehead. It's a sign of human frailty and fallenness, a symbol of our morality and our hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's a reminder of belonging....

Years ago, when a friend's daughter was dying in a New York City hospital, he left her bedside to go for a walk. Not knowing that it was Ash Wednesday, in a crushing fog of grief, he was startled by people on the sidewalks with the sign of the cross on their foreheads. He slowly remembered the day and the symbol and that he wasn't alone; he took comfort in the reminder that his daughter belonged to God in Christ.

When I got home on Wednesday night I saw a picture of a woman in Parkland, Florida holding up another woman who was collapsing in anguish. On her forehead, as big and clear as could be, were the ashy lines of a cross. It was startling to see an image of frailty, fallenness, and faith inserted into the middle of the American ritual of a school shooting. I felt some sense of belonging to that woman. I share in her fear, her shock, her grief, and her faith.

My father was murdered within my arm's reach. The gunman shot him point blank in the side. After I ran to call for an ambulance I stood on the edge of the gathering crowd. My mother held my dying father in her arms. Others clung to and held up one another. I stood alone praying ~ believing with every cell in my body that God could or would save my father. He died while I prayed.

*If you had been here, my father would not have died.*

Lazarus died just a few miles from Jesus. The logistics and timeline in the text are a little confusing, but four days after Lazarus dies Jesus goes to the tomb. He'd healed paralytics, saved sick children, walked on water, fed thousands, and given sight to one born blind, but Jesus wasn't there when his friend was dying. He could have done more. He didn't. When he arrived, Mary collapsed at his feet and cried out.

*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

The same Mary, who poured out perfume and wiped the feet of Jesus with her hair, cried out in a mix of anguish, anger, despair, and longing. Her brother's death was senseless. It didn't have to be this way.

*If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

Parents in Parkland join those from Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine, and on and on and on, in a now familiar pattern: there's a school shooting, leaders offer "thoughts and prayers," candle light vigils are held, children are buried. Repeat. Parents are stunned that it happened in their idyllic community; they don't know why something more wasn't done to protect their children. It is all so senseless. It didn't have to be this way.

*If you had been here, my child would not have died.*

According to an international survey, Americans make up 4.4 percent of the world's population but have 42 percent of the world's privately-owned guns. While there are developing countries with higher rates of death by gun ~ mass shootings, suicides, murder, and accidental death by gun are indelibly etched in our national identity. And the response to each shooting is predictable. Since 1995 congressional leaders have risen to speak "thoughts and prayers" into the public record over 4000 times.

Liberals bemoan access to assault-style-rifles and a limitless supply of ammunition, they call for laws that restrict access to bump stocks, or AR-15s, or better background checks, or some sort of required training or licensing or....

Conservatives bemoan the evil of the shooter, want to protect the rights of law abiding gun owners, argue that guns are inanimate tools, want more good guys with guns to stop the bad guys with guns, and call for a spiritual revival because this is a matter of the heart...

And President Trump reminds us that we are one American family, that we will do everything we can to stand with the suffering, even while rolling back Obama era restrictions on gun access for those with diagnosed mental illnesses/disabilities and presenting a budget that drastically cuts funding for school safety and mental health care....

Nothing changes. And parents cry out:

*If you had been here, my child would not have died.*

Dear friends, our text this morning is woven with honest human emotion. Martha goes out to greet Jesus, but Mary ~ maybe too heartsick or too angry ~ stays inside surrounded by family and friends. When she finally goes to Jesus she falls at his feet and weeps. Where were you? Why didn't you do more? Why?

In response Jesus is “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”

In Greek the words have the sense of being unsettled, disturbed, shaken, angry; one of the words is used to describe a horse snorting. And a few verses later, when Jesus goes to the tomb, again he is “deeply moved.” But in the middle of those descriptors is the shortest sentence in scripture, “Jesus wept.”

Calvin writes that “Christ has put on our feelings along with our flesh.” The Belgic Confession has it that God in Christ was “truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses.” That is not to suggest that crying is weakness, but it is to remember the remarkable claim of the gospels that Jesus was fully human....

When my father was murdered the first, strongest, and sustained emotion that I knew was deep sorrow. Not rage or revenge or regret but sorrow. Sorrow for all us. Sorrow for the knot of drug addiction, racism, easy access to guns, unemployment, indifference to human life, violence, injustice, poverty, death....

And what I knew in that sorrow was that I was not alone. I knew that I belonged to a pool of the victims of gun violence. And that God wept with me, with us, for all of us. Even as our hearts break, God’s heart breaks. Even as we weep, Jesus weeps. Even as parents cry out, Jesus cries out. One respected biblical scholar writes that the word could be better be translated, “Jesus bawled.”

Of course, there is scholarly dispute about why Jesus cried. If he knew that he was going to raise Lazarus, why cry? Some speculate that he wept because Mary’s faith wasn’t strong enough and the evidence is her questioning his absence and not proclaiming that he could still raise him from the dead... Seriously?

I think we stand at the intersection of the great claims of gospels.

I think we stand at the intersection of a great mystery.

If Jesus is not fully human then he doesn’t know our loss and despair.

If Jesus is not fully human then he doesn’t know a broken heart.

If Jesus is not fully human then he doesn’t know our tears.

But, if Jesus is not fully God then there is no hope of healing.

If Jesus is not fully God then there is no power over death.

If Jesus is not fully God then there is no resurrection.

For, with tears in his eyes, Jesus asked that the stone be moved away. Martha rebuffed him because of the smell. There was a common belief that the spirit of a man lingered near the body for three days, but by the fourth he was really dead.

Soul dead. Stinky dead. Dead dead. In response Jesus bellows out for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. The Good Shepherd “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” And....

*The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.*

Dear friends, this is the turning point of the Gospel of John; everything from here on leads to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The great claim in this text is that God in Christ has power over death. From outside of us, from outside of our best efforts and outside of our brokenness, there is a power that triumphs over both physical death and spiritual death.

It's not that we don't die. Everyone dies. Parents die. Children die. Lazarus will die again. Even Jesus will die. But, the glory of God in Christ is that death doesn't have the last word. There is resurrection out of crucifixion. There is hope in the midst of crushing grief. There is abundant life that even swallows up death.

Dear friends, that's the gospel.

But, I think sometimes all we can do, the best we can muster, is joining Mary, Jesus, and parents in Parkland in weeping. Sometimes all we've got is being deeply moved of spirit, angry, snorting like horses. Maybe that's all we can do this morning....

*If you had been here, my child would not have died.*

I think there are things that can be done to curb gun violence. I think it involves attention to and investment in the mentally ill. I think it involves restrictions on the kinds of guns and the quality and quantity of ammunition that is available. I think it involves the sacrifice of certain open-ended rights in an effort to limit the carnage. I think it involves a change of heart. We can do better. We must do better. And as “thoughts and prayers” move us to real action then so be it....

But. But I believe that outside of what we can do there is a compassionate God, who shares in our sorrow, and who is responsive to our frailty and our fallenness. Death in Parkland, or a church parking lot in Chicago, the sting of tears and the smudge of ash, are not the end. Even a God who weeps is not the end. For we are not alone, but we belong body and soul in life and in death to Jesus Christ ~ who is the resurrection and the life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.