GRACE
LUTHERAN
CHURCH

November 1 – All Saints – Mary of Bethany

This passage from John 11 has been a deeply rooted part of my faith journey. It may have started with the discovery of a two-word verse, but it quickly went deeper than that. There was always an intrigue at the thought that Jesus would cry at a funeral. Jesus is the Son of God. Why would God cry? Most of my earliest memories were of watching twin brothers buried after dying in infancy. There was something reassuring about a God who cries.

This text took on a deeper meaning in the fall of 2021 as it was read at my brother Jason's memorial service. For the first time, I cringed as it was ready and found myself very anxious about what the pastor may say. My brother died by his own hand, and over the years I have heard some terrible and hateful homilies after someone had completed suicide.

In this text, Mary is extremely distraught. After all, this could have all been prevented. Mary and Martha had sent multiple messengers. Jesus waited. You can start to imagine that "should have/would have/ could have" mindset set in as she become inconsolable. As she arrives at Jesus feet, with tear filled eyes, her response is the same as her sister's, "Lord, if only…"

What follows is profound. Jesus breaks down. In the Greek, it speaks of him almost shaking. His emotions become overwhelming. Jesus, the very Son of God is caught in the same feelings that many of us have at the loss of a loved one. He is simultaneously caught in intense grief and anger. There is the loss of a close friend along with an anger at the realities of death. Some translations say "began to cry." The Greek is closer to tears flooding down his face while he remains quiet. Hurt, but not broken.

Would Jesus have responded that way if he had not come across Mary and witnessed her weeping? If the conversation with Martha is any indication, the answer would be "no". Jesus meets each of them where they are at. Martha gives a statement of faith and Jesus responds with his own. Mary is overcome with emotion, and Jesus meets her in her suffering. It may be that the reason we only hear of Jesus weeping here and the Garden of Gethsemane is because Mary was the only person willing to become that vulnerable in his presence.

There is comfort in knowing that God can meet us in our suffering. The answer may look very different in different settings, but the presence of God is not in question. For Mary, the story ends with Lazarus returning from the tomb. He is unbound and returns home. For others, it is a different kind of life, a new life. I think of my brother and the way that he was set free from all of the mental anguish, no longer in pain or suffering under the pressures in his own mind.

As we gather on All Saints' Sunday, we come with heavy hearts. It is a day that we remember those who have gone before us. We remember the saints of this community of faith, our families, and others who have made an impact in our lives. Our response is often measured, believing it to be unacceptable to weep in public.

That is fine. I am that way too. What this example of Mary teaches us is that God will meet us where we are at. God came near in the person of Christ Jesus to walk alongside humanity through all that we experience. Grief and anger are included in that.

Whatever you are feeling this day is okay. God will meet you where you are. That is how grace works. As Anne Almmott says, "Grace meets you where you are, but it never leaves you there." God meets us in our joys and sorrows but will not leave us there. We always grieve with hope. Amen.

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