

The Gift of Tears
Sermon on Luke 7:36-50
Sunday June 17, 2007
Trinity United, Ottawa
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*“She stood at his feet weeping and began to bath his feet with her tears
and to dry them with her hair.” Lk 7:38*

Such extravagant expression of feeling. Such tenderness this woman serves upon Jesus, releasing her tears in a flood to wash his feet clean, drying his feet with her hair!

Is this beautiful for you to hear of? Or perhaps its uncomfortable to imagine such an unabashed public display of emotion? How might you have felt, if you witnessed it?

To be washing his feet with her tears, this woman must have really lost control and abandoned decorum. Evidently, she is so overwhelmed by the feeling of being *for once*, understood, forgiven, accepted - that her expression of thanks to Jesus is beyond words. Tears run down her cheeks and drip off her chin onto his feet, and her eyes grow first glossy, then red. No doubt her nose runs and audible sobs of relief escape from her throat. *She’s a mess!*

Simon, their Pharisee host is clearly ill at ease, mumbling to himself: why doesn’t Jesus put an end to this display? If he is really a prophet, why doesn’t Jesus realize that this woman is unworthy of the hospitality of Simon’s house - and certainly not someone Jesus should touch or be touched by! Simon, in his discomfort with this emotional, inferior woman, casts his judgement on her and on Jesus.

Jesus reads Simon’s body language and expression, hearing his host’s unspoken criticism. He responds with one of his teaching analogies - a story that raises the

weeping woman up with appreciation. Then Jesus honours the woman's extravagant display of love - the gift of her tears- with a blessing of deep peace.

How do *we* respond to unchecked displays of tears today - whether they express sadness, grief or even joy and relief? Even at funerals, we still tend to laud those who are 'strong' and don't allow their honest grief to flow. Our traditional culture, including old church culture, is on Simon's side. We get uncomfortable when people cry. Most of us descend from British 'stiff upper lip' stock and as we heard in last week's Anniversary celebration, we share roots in our United Church with the Scottish Presbyterians - the 'frozen chosen' I've heard them call themselves!

To cry is to 'lose control' - for so many of us, and especially for WW II stock. It is misunderstood as a sign of weakness. Until just a few decades ago, for a man to cry was to be less than a man - to be God forbid - 'womanly.' No wonder men fear their tears and dads used to teach their sons that to cry was to be 'sissy' - not big, not strong. Most of us are deeply programmed to be ashamed of our own tears and - having learned to painfully withhold them, we may feel uncomfortable when others cry. So our well meaning efforts focus on getting people to stop crying - passing them that kleenex box prematurely!

And yet, Jesus received this woman's tears as a gift and seemed to encourage her to go on unchecked. And in the Garden of Gethemane, we know that Jesus himself openly wept, falling down to the ground and allowing his whole body to pour out his fear and distress.

So can tears *really* be bad?

A few weeks ago, I once again encountered someone dashing out of church before the postlude - not to get to the bathroom - but because she was so embarrassed about crying in church. She wanted to leave quickly. As I gave her a hug she began a litany of apology that is quite familiar: "Oh, I feel such a fool. I'm sorry. Here I

am carrying on. I wasn't like this yesterday. Really. I'm sorry. I was OK till the prayer this morning, but then I really lost it. My bladder is just too close to my eyes... I shouldn't have come to church. When I come here I can't keep from crying!" Have you heard - or said - words like this?

It matters not whether that particular individual was a guilt stricken mom or a grieving widower. Whether he or she was struggling with a difficult separation or a bout of depression. Whether it was work stress or health worries or the weight of our world that bubbled up unexpectedly from their chest as they sang that opening hymn. People cry in church! Every week. Sometimes for reasons we all know like a recent loss, sometimes for reasons that are quite private still. But lots of us cry when we come home to God's house.

And this is GOOD!

Believe it or not, it is right and good, normal and healthy, human and healing even, to cry in church. When people cry in church, I smile. Not because I'm mean! But because I know that tears are not a problem. They are part of the solution!

Tears release tension and stress, pain and injury of all kinds. They are a gift from God that help us to heal. It doesn't harm anyone to cry. Tears help us to feel and then to recover from our hurt - whether it is a fresh burn on our hand or an old ache in our heart.

When the weeping woman presented herself, first out in our gallery, and then in our lectionary text, I resolved to preach about this. Because frankly, it distresses me when people tell me they can't come to church because they are afraid they'll cry. Usually, the one who tells me this is a person who wants to come to church, to feel the caring and support of their community. The very person who needs to sit here in this safe and sacred space where they feel God's love and can finally let go and weep. The person who will heal better if they do not hide away at home with their

tears. And the person you and I most want to connect with on a Sunday morning, to check on how they are doing this week with their challenges and changes.

Have you noticed how often tears are triggered by a word of kindness or a feeling of safety? That's part of why church is such a common place to cry. The caring of longtime friends and the felt presence of God's love are a powerful combination for inducing healing tears. Our body and the soul recognize conditions that are conducive to crying and getting better.

Tears are one way we communicate our honest feelings, whether we intend to or not. They issue our unspoken invitation to receive healing attention. They draw others to share in what is difficult to bear alone. This is good. Because it makes us all stronger. Those who give comfort and those who receive.

All humans cry when they get hurt -whether the hurt is physical or emotional. Crying is an involuntary response - unless we train ourselves out of it with punishment or shame or fear. Why would nature and God have created this complex biochemical drama, if weeping weren't part of the intricate beauty of human being?

For those who need medical affirmation to cry more freely, know that tears serve to clear excess hormones out of our systems, after they have been released to fuel our fight or flight responses. If these hormones don't flow out, they become toxins, harmful to our system.. Tears do a vital chemical cleansing job for our bodies. Their free-flow may help to save some folks from accumulating the stress that contributes to cancer and strokes.

Crying out our pain has mental and spiritual benefits too. It leaves us more available brain space to think clearly about our situation and resolve difficulties. And when we cry out our anger, we find our natural inclination to forgive.

Most of us know about having 'a good cry', that leaves us feeling emotionally

lighter. The process of crying out a hurt till the crying is done, actually makes us feel better and helps us to get better. Studies with burn victims support this. We don't need studies of grieving spouses show us that the way to new happiness usually travels via the veil of tears. This is not new news. Shakespeare wrote: "To weep is to make less the depth of grief."

And the crying will be eventually be done. Many who have held their tears for too long fear that if they begin, they just won't ever be able to stop. But fear not. I've counselled enough people to say with confidence: Your tears will run out as surely as a thunderstorm will pass, and the sun will come out again. Cry today when you feel the need and you won't always want to cry when you hear that hymn!

I know this is a big cultural shift, but perhaps here at Trinity, we can help each other heal by responding with a smile when we notice someone crying. To show them that it doesn't upset us - that they don't need to stop for our sake. We can offer few words, but much loving attention...for just as long as the crying takes. We can be clear that, like Jesus, we won't judge the woman for weeping - or the man either! Indeed, we can bless them in their healing tears with the *deep peace* that will surely come.

Tears are God's gift to us, for washing our wounded souls clear. And then comes healing laughter - the next medicine!

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