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Beyond the Tears

John 11:33

It was the first time that I had ever seen my Dad cry. I was twelve years old and we were attending the funeral of my uncle. My uncle was a former navy fighter pilot and a flight instructor. He died when one of his students froze at the controls and crashed the small plane in which they were practicing landings. He left a wife and three school age children. There were several reasons for the depth of my Dad's emotion. He had become close to his brother-in-law during the years leading up to this tragedy. But more than that, this death was especially difficult for my mother. This was her younger brother and she had helped to raise him. She was twelve years old when her mother died and as the oldest daughter she assumed some parental responsibility for her younger brother and sister. My Dad understood that this tragedy had re-opened many old wounds for her.

We were seated in the choir section of the chancel of the small church where the service was held. The church was so full that every seat had to be used. I think it was when the meditation ended that my Dad began to weep. He lost control. Because of where we were seated it was a very public display of grief. The pastor of the church saw what was happening from across the chancel. He walked over to where we were seated and put his hand on Dad's shoulder. It was a healing moment in which the compassion of God was revealed.

It is a scene like this which is described in the 11th chapter of John's gospel. Jesus arrives to find people weeping at a funeral in a graveyard. Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. Mary and Martha have lost their brother. This death is untimely and their grief is raw. John tells us that when Jesus sees the weeping of these sisters and all the friends who have come to the graveyard he is "deeply moved (John 11:33)." Soon Jesus begins to weep as well. This is a moment in which Jesus enters fully into the brokenness of human life.

When Jesus acts he reveals the compassion of God for this family and for the whole human race. When he calls Lazarus out of the cave and announces that he is no longer a prisoner of death, he is giving us a sign. The raising of Lazarus is a sign that God's compassion is already at work to transform the human condition. God's hand is on our shoulders leading us to a different kind of future where death is no longer our enemy. Jesus' tears lead us to the waters of baptism where life is truly made new.

The fourth elder to be ordained in this church was a Scots-Irishman named Thomas Moffett. He was a founding member of this church. He was a teacher who studied the law in his spare time and became the first man admitted to the bar in Sangamon County. He later served as a probate and county judge. Through his 42 years of service as an elder he demonstrated how deeply he loved this church. But he was also a man who was well acquainted with grief. When he died in 1877 his wife and all eight of his children had preceded him in death, including the son named for him who fell in the Civil War. At the time of Moffett's death his pastor, George Fullerton, summed up his life in these words:

Notwithstanding Brother Moffett experienced such a terrible affliction in the loss of his wife and all of his children, he never swerved from the path of duty. He endured the

extreme severity of his losses with Christian resignation and fortitude. They seemed to purify his heart...and increase his devotion to the religious interests of the church. He...spent much time...in personal visitation upon the families of the congregation...He frequently performed the duties of a chorister in the church...and although he did not sing with the skill of more scientific leaders, I will venture to say that Old Hundred and Dundee and other venerable tunes were scarcely ever sung by any with a more devotional feeling, or a deeper sense of the importance of sacred music. He was evidently controlled in his daily intercourse by the exhortation of the Apostle, "Feed the flock of God, which is among you..."¹

Thomas Moffett understood what Jesus did when he commanded Lazarus to come out of the cave. This church was for him a powerful sign that God's compassion is at work to transform our brokenness.

Endnotes

1. George Fullerton, quoted in the Address of James C. Conkling, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Vol. I, C. L. Conkling, pages 19-22.