

# IN THE BUSINESS OF ENDING TEARS

Sermon, April 25, 2010

Texts: Psalm 23, Acts 9:20-25, Revelation 7:9-17

"It was one of the worst days of my life," wrote Clara Null of Oklahoma City in The Christian Reader magazine. "The washing machine broke down, the telephone kept ringing, my head ached, and the mail carrier brought a bunch of bills for which I had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, I lifted my one year old into his highchair, leaned my head against the tray, and began to cry. Without a word, my son took his pacifier out of his mouth ... and stuck it in mine." Some of you have been there. Broken appliances, flooded basements, too many bills, and any little thing can just push you over the edge. Maybe this precocious baby was Jewish; there's a profound line from the Jewish Talmud reads: "It is better that children cry than that their mothers cry." (Sukkah 21).

Tears really are a universal human experience. There may be some people who say they never cry, but in a way, they are more to be pitied than envied. Research shows the most common reason for crying is, not surprisingly, sadness. This is followed in rank, interestingly, by happiness. Tears of happiness aren't always purely joyful, though ... the happiness of a moment often brings tears because it is also tinged with sadness; e.g., a happy occasion such as a baptism of a delightful baby is tinged with the sweet sadness of those who can't be here to participate; the happy tears at a child's graduation are tinged with the tears of regret for something you or perhaps another of your children were unable to accomplish. Tears of happiness, according to this research, were followed in rank by tears of anger, then sympathy, then anxiety and finally fear. Biologists tell us that, chemically, tears resulting from emotions like sadness, anger, fear or joy are different from those tears caused, say, by smelling onions or banging your thumb with a hammer. The tears we shed when we are in emotional distress may be nature's method of removing toxins built up by stress in the body. Research also tells us that on average, women cry five times as often as men ... which may be a factor in their superior longevity.

I think one of the defining statements in all the Bible about the nature of God and the business of God can be found in the last verse of our reading from Revelation. At the conclusion of this magnificent description of the angels, the martyrs and the saints all gathered around God's heavenly throne in worship and adoration, we read this profound statement: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." No subordinate is doing this, no lower-ranked angel or heavenly saint ... God the Creator, God the One Who sits on that throne, God the One who fashioned the universe and keeps it all in motion, this same God is the One Who deigns to come to His children in compassion and intimacy and personally wipe away the tears from their eyes. After all, this is the ultimate desire and the ultimate business of God ... to comfort, to restore, to redeem, to remove all cause for fear, sadness, brokenness, want; in a word, He wants to do away with all the things that cause our tears. When God wipes away tears, it'll be the end of tears! All the things that cause our tears will one day be no more.

Meanwhile, we are still in the "vale of tears," this side of heaven. That's a bit of an archaic term, "vale of tears" .... "vale" is short for "valley"; we still reside in the "valley" where tears continue to be a reality. It is roughly synonymous with the "valley of the shadow of death"; for we still live in this world where death is a reality. A large part of our calling in this vale is to do all we can to be coworkers with God in this business of tear removal ... to be coworkers with Him in the work of redeeming, restoring, mending, comforting, serving while we are this side of heaven. That is to be at the heart of all we do at church, at home, in our work, in our neighborhoods, even on the field of battle ... we are to be about the divine business of tear removal. At times we in the church sort of "collapse" the meaning of salvation, limiting salvation to the forgiveness of sins and securing our place in heaven through the grace of Jesus. It is certainly about these things, but it is about so much more ... salvation is also about salvaging, saving, fixing, restoring all that is broken of God's good creation in the name of Jesus ... it won't happen fully this side of heaven, but one day all will be complete, whole, restored.

Each summer since 2000, with your support the young people from this congregation and their adult leaders have gone on some sort of mission training trip. In 2000, 12 went to Garysburg, NC; in 2001, 24 went to Littleton, NH; in 2002, 26 went to Montgomery W. VA; in 2003, 28 when to Ontario, CN; in 2004, 10 went to Rochester, NH; in 2005, 19 went to Reading, PA; in 2006, 34 to DC (*though not technically a hands-on mission, the 2006 DC conference hosted many training workshops*); in 2007, 26 went to Philadelphia; in 2008, 24 returned to Philadelphia; last summer fifteen served in needy parts of the North Shore area of MA (mostly Lynn), and this summer PYF is planning to return to the same area. Now, why do they go? They do go to donate their time, energy and talents to building and refurbishing projects for needy people usually residing in areas of economic difficulty, but there's more. What are they really up to? What's their business? Their business is not just to give themselves something "to do" in the summer, although it very definitely does that ... however, they could easily find plenty else to do, as could their selfless leaders who take time off from work and family to accompany and assist them. Nor is their business to just do something nice for needy people, although this, too, is certainly accomplished. Nor is their business just to have

fun, although this annual experience has given wholesome, cherished, enjoyable memories that'll last a lifetime. Their main business each summer is to exercise, and learn how to better fulfill, their life's calling. Their business is to learn how to better mind their *ultimate* business in life, serving God through service to others and in doing so learning to be coworkers with God in doing what they can to remove tears.

When we left Saul last week, he was on his way to a mission trip of a sort to Damascus. Thousands of Jews had become followers of this Jesus and had joined this new organization known as the "church." Saul was determined to put a stop to it. Along the way to his mission trip, Saul was blinded by a vision of Jesus Christ, which began to change everything for him. Three days after that vision, Saul became a member of the very church he tried to destroy. Today's reading from Acts begins by telling us Saul began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues saying, "Jesus is the Son of God." Imagine how the synagogue leaders must have felt. I'm sure the Jewish leaders were more than happy to have this credentialed student of Gamaliel, this "Pharisee of the Pharisees", this one commissioned by the High Priest of Jerusalem himself, speak in their synagogues. More than likely they readily and eagerly gave Saul the "pulpit," so to speak, and were no doubt shocked to hear him say, in so many words, "You know, I was wrong about this Jesus. I thought he was a messianic pretender, but Jesus really was God's own Son, who died for our sins. He really is the Messiah." I'm sure they were baffled and amazed, as well as astonished. Acts 9:21 -- *"All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'"*

We are told Paul grew more powerful in his preaching and baffled the Jews by proving Jesus was the Messiah. However, what we are not told, interestingly, is that anyone in Damascus was actually *converted* because of Paul's preaching. Up until now in the preceding eight chapters, Luke, the author of Acts, more or less kept a running count of those who converted and joined the church, whether it was several thousand or just a single Ethiopian. It would be uncharacteristic for him not to mention any conversions in Damascus. Saul may have baffled the Jews with his convincing proofs and powerful preaching, but apparently he may have done little more than anger them, rather than convert them. We are specifically told that some of the people there got so fed up with Paul that they plotted to kill him. Keep in mind (*as pointed out last week; see Galatians 1*) Saul was there in Damascus for some three years before he was driven to escape from the town. He can't even leave by the city gate, because people are lying in wait for him; so he has to get some friends to lower him down the city walls by night sitting in a basket! What do you think was going on in his mind as his friends lowered him in that humble basket? Do you think he was discouraged? Do you think he felt the tears of failure? After three years of labor the only "soul" he managed to save, it seems, was his own with this humiliating escape.

We know from his later letters that Paul thought long and hard about his failure in Damascus. Rather than get discouraged by it, though, he learned from it. He became a better servant of God through it. I have been a pastor long enough to know that in just about every life here there is, or has been, a great failure that may continue to haunt. It may be failure in professional life, it may be failure in personal life ... in your family, raising children, in friendships, in keeping a marriage together; it may be a failure in the dreams you never quite managed to pursue. I might also add that if you *haven't* known failure in any area of life, then shame on you! That probably means you have been much too careful with your life. Anyone who is attempting to live life well, to live life to its fullest, will spend time on the edges ... and one can't get out on the edge, where risk is taken and faith exercised, without occasionally failing. You just can't do it all; none of us can. The question is, how do we handle failure? Do we quit? Do we get discouraged and defeated by failure? Or, like Paul, do we learn from failure how to be better?

We are under no illusions our young people will "save" Lynn, MA this summer any more than Paul saved Damascus. They will probably "fail." They probably won't initiate some large-scale economic and spiritual recovery in that destitute area any more so than they had in any of the other places they've served this past decade. They may have as much a lasting effect on these areas as Paul seemed to have had in Damascus. However, like Paul, they will learn invaluable, lifelong lessons from their experiences. They will become better servants of God through these experiences. That is their business, to both (a) try and be a blessing and (b) to learn how to better mind the ultimate business of their lives. By the way, they have and they will have some immediate successes; people have always been richly blessed by their tear removal efforts .... after all, "practically" ineffective as he was, that baby certainly succeeded in being a source of blessing to his mother with that pacifier!

It's the same, really, with everything this church does ... the May Breakfast this Saturday, the Blood Drive also coming up, the mission gathering next Sunday, the 39ers and the circles and the youth fellowships that meet for mutual encouragement and fellowship week in and week out, all of these gather not just for the fun of getting together or finding something "to do;" ultimately, all these functions and activities are geared to find ways to be a blessing to others, to serve God by joining Him in this redeeming work of restoration, redemption and tear removal. It is to be at the heart of all we do. We are, wherever we are and whatever we do, to be in the business of tear removal. That is the business of your life, that is the business of my life; that is the business of the church.