

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

May 20, 2007

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

The Diverse Reality of Tears

John 11: 30-38

I remember the day rather vividly, though it happened over ten years ago. I had arisen to take my usual early-morning run, when I happened to notice one of the kids' books beside a table -- *The Jesse Owens Story*. Almost unconsciously, I picked it up and read the thin little book in about ten minutes.

Then I took off on my run, finding myself thinking of the great track star Jesse Owens, which started me thinking about my old college track coach, Spec Towns, who was a teammate of Jesse Owens on the 1936 U.S. Olympic team. Like Jesse Owens, my coach was an Olympic gold medalist and a world record holder, in the 110 high hurdles. I was thinking of Spec as I ran up a hill, and suddenly inside my head I could hear the Olympic trumpets, only this time pealed by a church organ. With that sound came the inner vision of Spec's casket being escorted down the aisle of the First Baptist Church of Athens, Georgia, between a corridor of athletes gathered from across Spec's 40 years of coaching. I was among their number.

Suddenly, a collage of faces I hadn't seen or thought about for over a decade came clearly into focus.

As the top of the hill was touched by the first light of morning, the image of Spec's casket, the sound of those trumpets, the collage of those many lost faces came together

in a weird and powerful confluence. I began to weep. I wept because I realized that more than half the life I have lived lies recorded in an intricate network of my unconsciousness.

I realized that whole communities of my past exist no more, save within my mind;

Entire eras of my existence have been scattered by the winds of time;
they live only within my memories.

For many of us, so much of what we have treasured lies buried beneath the earth and beneath the surface of our conscious awareness. Entire epochs are alive nowhere save inside our heads.

As I ran with tears rolling down my face, I wept not for my irretrievable youth, I wept not in grief, rather I wept in amazement, never realizing until just that moment how meaningful that period of my life had been for me. Until that moment I had no awareness of how those rich experiences, retrieved through evocative memories, continued to inform my existence.

I cried in wonder at how little of life we comprehend and appreciate while we are living it.

Kierkegaard had it right: we live life forward, but we understand it backward.

One reason that day sticks in my mind is that it was the very same day I went to see Claude Broach for the last time. Dr. Broach had pastored this church for thirty years, and though he had moved away from Charlotte for a long time to enjoy retirement in Tryon, he had moved back to the area, and I had come to know him well in his last years. Now his end was imminent. It was mid-afternoon, and he was in bed, a place he had heretofore avoided by pride and temperament. Yet there he was.

I was comforted to see him flash that familiar grin, comforted to see the distinctive sparkle of his eye.

We had a congenial visit, as we always did. But we couldn't avoid the obvious, and I said to him, almost whispering, "You are so special. You are such a special man."

He responded, "I will be honored to have you do my funeral." Then we hugged.

As we hugged, the depth of the loss of this friend overwhelmed me like a wave, and suddenly I was not the comforter but the comforted -- I lay my head on his chest and wept like a child.

As I looked up and saw Claude's own glistening eyes, the tears rolling down his face, it occurred to me that life is eminently meaningful, and one of the chief instruments by which God communicates that meaning is through the medium of other human lives.

Our tears are reminders that below life's seemingly ordinary surface is a great ocean of meaning. Each tiny tear is expressive of the foundation of who we are. Each tear reveals our fundamental values. Driving down the interstate, still wiping the occasional tear from my eyes, knowing that I would not see my friend alive on earth again, I realized that within one day I had encountered the diverse reality of tears.

Jesus comes to see sick Lazarus and doesn't arrive in time, and Lazarus dies, and Jesus weeps. If someone had asked, "Jesus, why are you crying?" Jesus could not have given them a straight answer. He was crying for Martha and Mary, who were crying for their brother, he was crying for lost Lazarus, he was crying for himself, he was crying to see all these other people crying. He was crying for the fallenness of creation. He was crying because there is so much pain in the world. Our tears are seldom simple in meaning. Our tears are almost always complex. The Bible, with rigorous honesty, presents the scene in its full complexity. Some onlookers said, "Oh, look how he loved him," but his critics, never far from the scene, said, "Why couldn't this guy who goes around healing everybody else have saved the life of his friend?" That is a question we would like answered, too, but the Bible doesn't say. The Bible doesn't answer this question with reference to Lazarus any more than it answers Why? about the ten thousand other good people in our lives who deserved saving and did not receive it. The Bible doesn't tell us why some are healed and some are not. All the Bible gives us is the picture of a weeping God.

Jesus cries because he knows the times are "out of joint," as Shakespeare would say. Jesus' tears for Lazarus are similar to those he sheds for Jerusalem as he views the holy city from a high hill and laments, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I would have gathered you under my wings like a mother hen gathers her chicks but you would not." It is Jesus' fate to preach to a city headed for annihilation in the next generation, a city he knows that he might be able to save if only they would hearken to his words of genius -- but they will not. Jesus weeps for Lazarus, Jesus weeps for Jerusalem; Jesus weeps for a world indifferent to his power of redemption. He weeps because the times are out of joint.

How often as a counselor and as a pastor I have wept because I knew the times were "out of joint" -- that the individual or the couple before me would not find healing until after their present lives were destroyed. Sometimes the external observer can see that the marriage is bound to shatter, the headstrong person is bound to hit the wall, the prodigal is sure to go off into the far country and fall into the abyss, the arrogant businessman is destined to overreach; the alcoholic is destined to lose everything. These things are bound to happen, and I know that nothing I can say is going to change it. One cries because the times are out of joint for these lives. Yet I also cry because I remain hopeful. I remain hopeful that after these lives have been rent asunder perhaps God can do for them what God has done for Lazarus, connect them to God's power of restoration and resurrection.

Never forget that our tears are a sign of God's love, symbols of openness to God's compassion. Lose the capacity to cry, and you lose your humanity. We can become like that Bosnian undertaker a generation ago who had seen so many slaughtered bodies that when the body of his own soldier son passed before him, he had no tears to weep. He threw his son into the pit with all the others, knowing that he could not cry; the savagery of war had burned up all of his tears. He knows that he has become less than human.

Far better to be Jesus, weeping for Lazarus, weeping for Jerusalem, weeping for the world, feeling in his marrow the heartache of humanity!

From the annals of early church history comes a story about a bishop named Nonnus. It seems that Nonnus was leading an outdoor Bible study of other bishops when a beautiful harlot named Pelagia and her entourage walked by. The beautiful Pelagia was resplendent in her jewelry, but wearing very little else, and the other bishops hid their faces, (okay, some of them may have risked one eye), but Nonnus watched her with rapt attention and asked the bishops why they did not rejoice in her beauty, seeing as God had made her? When they didn't reply, Nonnus buried his face in his Bible and wept. He wept that he did not adorn his soul for God in the same way this woman adorned herself for men. Then Nonnus rose to go preach in his church and wept copiously before his people as he urged them to cry for themselves, to cry for the world, to cry unto God. Pelagia happened to walk by and heard his crying and was moved by his tears, accepting the Gospel of Christ for herself. She retired to a hermitage and spent her days in repentance, becoming famous for her holiness, reached and converted by this bishop's powers of compassion. When our RAIN Team or Hospice Team loses a patient, the emptiness of that loss issues forth in tears. The natural reaction is to say to one's self, "I shouldn't let myself get so involved, shouldn't let myself get so invested." In truth, our tears of vulnerability are tears of love for the world! Such tears are signs of holiness, tears of pain that are expressions of divine love.

Jesus cries because he knows that his ordinary life is over. He cries because he knows that from the time he raises Lazarus, the ordinary life will be lost to him forever. To raise Lazarus from the dead is to mark himself for the cross. One doesn't witness as much pain and loss as I have seen without forming certain basic convictions, and this is one of mine: *what we call the normal life, what we regard as the ordinary existence, is truly one of the most extraordinary blessings on earth.* To find someone to love and to grow old with that person is an extraordinary ordinary privilege. To hold your own children in your hands and to watch them mature is an extraordinary ordinary privilege. To grow old with and enjoy your friends is an extraordinary ordinary privilege. To hold in your hands your children's children is an extraordinary ordinary privilege. To tutor others as you have been taught is an extraordinary ordinary privilege. What we call normal life is an amazing privilege, one of the most extraordinary blessings that anyone can possibly enjoy. We ought every morning to shed a gift of gratitude to our God for the gift of a day where our bodies function and our minds work, and we enjoy what people glibly call, "the normal life." In truth the normal life is one of the more abnormal blessings that anyone can possibly enjoy.

How long will God allow me to live my ordinary life? I do not know. None of us know our future, which is precisely what makes the ordinary life so extraordinary. None of us know the nature of the cross we will be called to carry. Everyone's cross is different. But Elie Wiesel, the Auschwitz survivor, was dead-on when he observed that ultimately we can only enjoy our existence when we cry tears of joy unto God, and yet, these tears of joy can only have meaning if first our tears are rooted in grief, despair and protest. Only when our eyes have burned with tears of grief, despair and protest can truly our tears of joy lay claim to the great promises of God.

The Scriptures say that when Lazarus died, Jesus was deeply moved not once, but twice. He was deeply moved when he first came upon the scene of weeping, but then,

when he saw the place where Lazarus' body had been placed, he was deeply moved again. Then he called Lazarus forth from the grave, not because he knew resurrection would solve his problems -- resurrection would surely complicate Lazarus' life and his own -- but because he believed that the resurrection power of God would be sufficient to deal with whatever beset them. Indeed, that is why Jesus comes into our world, to be deeply moved by our lives and to move us deeply toward God and connect us with the resurrection power of God.

Does it ever occur to us that the whole reason our Lord came into the world is to connect our lives to the resurrection power of God?

Are you deeply moved by life? Does life deeply move you to tears? Do you realize that beneath the surface of your life is an ocean of meaning and richness of relationship? The truth of the matter is, life is so structured that over the course of time we are to lose everything -- our youth, our health, our friends, our loved ones, our possessions, our lives -- EVERYTHING! But if we lose them in conversation with God through the relationship of faith, we gain something valuable and eternal in the process -- we gain our souls. We lose everything -- but when we do so in conversation with God, through those losses we gain our souls. When we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are baptized into the tears of God, and we are raised to walk in newness of life. What we are meant to learn through the course of our faith is that there will come a time when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more and mourning shall be no more and loss will be no more, for behold, these are all former things -- and God will make all things new. *Ultimately, God will make all things new.* If we can claim the truth that all that is good and beautiful and meaningful within our lives will be raised and restored within us to the God of life, then ultimately our tears of sorrow will become tears of joy

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
May 20, 2007