

Sermon: May 25, 2025

Jesus Weeps – On Jesus and Emotional Intelligence

John 11:17-37

The story of Lazarus rising from the dead only appears in the Gospel of John and it fits well into John's overall theme of revealing that Jesus is the Son of God and that those who believe in him will have life.

In the book of John, Jesus performs miracles in a number of different ways and this one is the 7th and final miracle. In most cases, Jesus is physically present when he performs a sign and, in one case, he even heals someone from a distance – a royal official's son (John 4:46-54). The miracle of Lazarus is unique. Lazarus is dying and his sisters Mary and Martha send word to their beloved friend Jesus to come and heal him. But, for some reason, Jesus intentionally delays his visit until Lazarus is already dead. Why does he do this? In the verses that come before the ones you heard this morning, Jesus and his disciples are finally on their way to Mary and Martha's house and he explains to his confused followers that he is glad that he wasn't there when Lazarus died. He says something similar to Martha and Mary – he is glad he wasn't there when Lazarus died.

Could Jesus not have helped his friends avoid the pain of losing a loved one? Does he appear somewhat indifferent to human suffering? Is he grandstanding by waiting to perform an even more impressive miracle? Bringing someone back from the dead is certainly more impressive than healing someone who is sick.

But when we read closely, we see that Jesus is not indifferent to suffering and does not perform miracles for his own sake.

In John 11:15, Jesus says to the disciples: "For *your* sake, I am glad I was not there." Not for his own sake. For their sake. And then later, in verse 40, Jesus says that he has done all of these things for the glory of

God. Jesus is an embodiment of God's power and love and his actions help people grow in their faith and their relationship with God. His miracles are therefore not about himself as a man, but about God and believers. When he brings Lazarus back to life, he creates an opportunity for believers to experience a "theophany" – an intense encounter with God that reveals God to them in a visible and tangible way.

Theophanies are biblical signs that can be found throughout the Bible – God's manifestation to Moses in the burning bush and Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to his friends, to name two. Because of their dramatic nature, these theophanies leave little room for doubt as to the existence of God and they show that God wants to make contact with us.

In the second part of this narrative, we witness something else that is extraordinary: Jesus' openly expressed grief and compassion. Jesus weeps with his friends and feels "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (John 11:33). How interesting that Jesus is so emotional despite the fact that he knows he will bring Lazarus back to the living and there will be much rejoicing. In some translations, "Jesus wept" is the shortest sentence in the Bible, but it is so full of meaning.

One thing I get from this passage is that God does not take the cup of suffering away from us, but suffers with us because we suffer and this is an essential part of being human. Furthermore, emotion can be our teacher if we allow it to guide us in helpful, not toxic, ways. Let's look at a few more scriptural passages about emotion.

Ephesians 4:26 tells us that we should not sin in anger and that we shouldn't let the sun go down on our anger. In other verses, we are told to not give way to the power of fear or be envious. Galatians 5:22-24 talks about positive emotions such as love, joy and patience as the "fruits of the Spirit" and stresses the importance of self-control when it comes to negative emotions.

The *heart* is also mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible and is understood to be the centre of our emotional life. But the heart also has a number of other functions. According to Psalm 119:11, the heart is *intellectual* in the sense that it can understand the Word of God. The heart is the seat of the *will*. It is capable of choice and self-control (Exodus 7:22-23). It can also be hardened and turn the will against God (Hebrews 4:7). Finally, the heart is *spiritual* in that it is the dwelling place of God. In other words, in the scriptures, the heart represents the totality of our inner life.

I recently returned from Manitoulin Island where I facilitated a workshop on Emotional Intelligence at Wikwemikong First Nation. Emotional Intelligence consists of a number of elements some of which are: self-awareness of one's own emotions, noticing and understanding the emotions of others, and practicing emotional regulation.

One of the key strategies for dealing with our emotions intelligently is to find the words to express them so that we can process them in a productive way. In her book, *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown talks about her research on emotional literacy. The results of her surveys revealed that many people could only recognize and name 3 basic emotions: "happy, sad and mad." Brown then goes on to provide 87 different possible emotion words that we could add to this list: worry, excitement, dread, vulnerability, resentment, frustration, regret, boredom, confusion, surprise, nostalgia, and Schadenfreude (or the feeling of taking pleasure at someone else's pain or shame). When I taught a course on Hinduism, I discovered a word that signifies the opposite of Schadenfreude – the Sanskrit word "mudita," which means to take joy in another person's well-being or success. In fact, I like this word so much that I got it tattooed on my arm.

When we are emotionally intelligent, we can notice our emotions and acknowledge their existence without self-judgment. So often when we experience negative or uncomfortable emotions, we label them as "bad"

and then have feelings about our feelings. We feel badly about having negative emotions which makes us feel worse.

When we “notice” negative emotions without judging them, we can instead ask ourselves if they are helpful or unhelpful rather than “bad.” Take anxiety as an example of both a helpful and unhelpful emotion. Anxiety that is helpful can motivate us to take constructive action, like when we are studying for a test in school and we want to do well. But anxiety that is unhelpful is when we are studying for a test and that anxiety overwhelms so that we can’t take constructive action.

Anger is another emotion that can be helpful or unhelpful. Anger that is helpful can inspire us to advocate for others who are oppressed or powerless and to change unjust systems. But anger that is unhelpful can cause us to commit acts of violence. If our emotions turn out to be unhelpful, we can use strategies to lower the intensity of these emotions so that they become helpful.

As a child, I used to read a book called “There’s No Such Thing as a Dragon.” I’ll share the first few pages with you.

Billy Bixbee was rather surprised when he woke up one morning and found a dragon in his room. It was a small dragon, about the size of a kitten. The dragon wagged its tail happily when Billy patted its head. Billy went downstairs to tell his mother. “There’s no such thing as a dragon!” said Billy’s mother. And she said it like she meant it.

Billy went back to his room and began to dress. The dragon came close to Billy and wagged its tail. But Billy didn’t pat it. If there’s no such thing as something, it’s silly to pat it on the head. Billy washed his face and hands and went down to breakfast. The dragon went along. It was bigger now, almost the size of a dog...

You can see where this is going. Billy and his mother continue to ignore the dragon’s presence and it continues to get bigger and bigger until it is so big that its head sticks out the front door and its tail sticks out the

back door and it ends up picking up the house and running down the street. Finally, unable to ignore it any longer, Billy exclaims, “see, there is such a thing as a dragon!!” And he and his mother pat it on the head. It immediately starts to get smaller. It had gotten big because it just wanted to be noticed.

When we deny our emotions, we run the risk of increasing their intensity, like Billy’s growing dragon. And as peacemakers, it is essential to acknowledge these emotions so that we can be responsive to people rather than reactive. When we are reactive, we don’t pause to consider what is happening for us emotionally or how we can respond to these emotions in a helpful way.

When Jesus encounters his friends in a moment of grief, they question his actions. They blame him for not coming sooner. But Jesus does not react defensively. He feels grief and compassion alongside them. He has not come too late. He has come at precisely the right time, to show his friends that grief and suffering happen in life and we must acknowledge this reality and learn to cope before we are healed. He leans into this human experience and makes an emotional connection. This is another sign that he is the Son of God who loves us throughout our pain and in our joy.

I’d like to end with these words from 2 Corinthians 1:3-5:

Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. Amen.