

Moved to Tears
Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4: 14-21
Psalm 19: 1-4, 14

When my daughter Beth was a freshman at Bucknell University, she spent the six-week January intercession teaching at the Shonto School, near Flagstaff, Arizona, on the fringe of the Navajo Reservation. She learned a great deal about Native American life and the problems and deep joys of the Navajo culture. Her experience was longer but similar to Katherine and Claire Murphy's when they went with Project Timothy to New Mexico this past summer.

Last Tuesday, on the morning news program, National Public Radio aired another in their series about going to college in America in which they have been interviewing students from all over the country about leaving home and going to school in a very different place. This particular segment included interviews with students from the Shonto School. Maybe even someone my daughter had known.

One student, a girl named Colleen, talked about the painful dislocation of leaving the reservation to attend Michigan State University, but at the same time how in making the move, a whole new world had opened up to her. Leaving had been the right decision.

Then her parents were interviewed. They were overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. They, too, knew it was right, but they missed her; they grieved the loss of their daughter. There was not much future for her on the reservation, that they knew. But they fervently prayed that she would not jettison her heritage, that she would always hold dear that she was Navajo,

and that the family hogan, there on the fringe of the reservation, would always signify home to her.

Colleen's parents cried. Their daughter most likely won't come home again. And as my own daughter commented, all of them were probably both sad and glad about that. They shed tears of gladness and sadness at the same time.

What is it in this life that moves us to tears?

Fundamentally, I believe it is the sense of loss. Or in the case of tears of joy, it is restoration – something we thought we had lost has been found or what we thought we were going to lose will be kept. Tears express what we do not have words for and what we cannot say. Like the water of baptism, tears have the power to cleanse and to heal. Tears flow when we are close to God.

When Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who were teachers, read and interpreted Torah to the assembled people of Israel, *all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.* What moved them to tears? Loss and the joy of restoration. When the people heard the laws they had forgotten, the statutes they had not observed, the covenant they had not kept, and the tradition of God's deliverance they had not remembered, they heard the loving, forgiving voice of the Lord. They had been living in exile, away from God, marginalized, on the fringe. But now, they realized their life as God's people was restored. God cared about how they lived. They were close to God once again and they wept. Tears have the power to cleanse and to heal.

When Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue on the sabbath, we do not hear anything about weeping. Surely those worshippers were in the presence of God. They knew that from the time that when Nehemiah and Ezra read Torah to them after the exile. Perhaps it had become routine, “same old, same old,” without the power to move them anymore.

But when Jesus read, from Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind...and to let the oppressed go free,”* and then, when he said, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,”* then did they know that God was really in their midst, right there in the person of Jesus? Luke doesn’t say that anyone wept.

But perhaps...The next verse reads: *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.* Perhaps there was someone on the fringe of the listeners gathered in the synagogue that day who silently wept. Maybe there was someone who understood that religious practice had once again become rote and legalistic and that here in this Jesus was God incarnate, come to find the lost and estranged and to restore them to relationship with God. Tears have the power to cleanse and to heal. Perhaps someone wept.

Really hearing the Word of God and feeling God’s presence is a moving experience. Tears are appropriate and may be the only way to express the conflicting emotions of loss and joy. After my brother died last May, my sister-in-law was troubled because she cried so much. Tears would just well up and overwhelm her, unexpected and uninvited. She missed him, she missed him so...She thought she was weak, that she wasn’t being strong,

but what she was was close to God, close to things eternal and awesome. No words could ever express what she was feeling and coming to know...no words, only tears. And tears have the power to cleanse and to heal.

Think of the times when you have been deeply moved by the presence of God: the loving kindness of a friend; a death; the innocent honesty of a child; the insight of a writer; a piece of music; a work of art; a sunset, the ocean, a mountain. Perhaps you have been moved to tears.

The psalmist writes: *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

And tears are falling.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts and the tears from deep within, be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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