

*The Scalpel*

Someone took a knife, and thrust into my chest, twisted that blade around, cut out a huge chunk of my flesh, and held it right in front of my disbelieving eyes. And I thank God he did; I thank God he did! That “someone” was a surgeon, the “knife” was scalpel; the twisting was part of the surgery, the “chunk of my flesh” was a tumor, and, yes, he held it before my disbelieving eyes and I saw it because I was awake through the entire surgery. Was it a pleasant experience? No, not at all! Was it necessary? Yes, most definitely.

Often in life the things that are the most necessary are very unpleasant, most unpleasant indeed. Later, after my surgery, I would be comforted by three of the most beautiful words in the English language. The doctor said, “It was benign.” Sadly, I know, those are not words everyone gets to hear, and tears are shed. Tears are shed.

Our scripture readings on the All Saints Day are just full of tears. First the prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of the Lord, says that on the Last Day God will destroy Death and He will wipe the tears from His people’s faces. In the Revelation, John says something amazingly similar. Again, when the first heaven and earth pass away, and the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, then God will wipe every tear from His people’s faces. It’s a bit different, more earth bound scene in the gospel reading today.

John's story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead has a lot of weeping. Mary of Bethany weeps for her brother who died. The Jews who came with Mary weep along with her. Even Jesus weeps. Some say Jesus weeps out of love for Lazarus; some say he wept out of sympathy for Mary and her grief; and still others say Jesus wept because of the people's misunderstanding and lack of faith. Whatever the reason, isn't it good to know that we have a Savior who weeps along side us, a Savior who sheds tears just as we do?

Why do we shed those tears? Often like Mary, it's for the death of a loved one. On this All Saints' Day we remember all our loved ones who have died, and it's right and natural that perhaps we shed a tear or two because we miss them so much. The loneliness death brings to the survivors is a painful thing. Sometimes we cry because we have been abandoned and betrayed by those we have loved. Vows and promises are broken, harsh words are said, and those we stood up for let us down. And we cry when dreams die, when faith is broken, and when it seems that even God Himself has failed and forsaken us. We shed tears all right.

Is there anybody out there who has never shed a tear for any of those reasons? Anyone whose life is so perfect that you could not think of a single reason to cry today if you would let yourself? Look around! There's a broken heart in every pew—including your own! We are broken people, people bound to one another, and bound to God's people throughout history, by the baptism of our own salty tears.

Perhaps you grew up in a culture like I did where people, especially men, were taught not cry because it was seen as a sign of weakness, a sign of loss

of control. “Keep a stiff upper lip,” we were told, “Hold all your emotions in. Don’t let anyone see you shed even a manly tear and, for God’s sake, no blubbing!”

Over the years various strategies have been employed to keep our tears at bay. One strategy is to simply not care about anything or anyone. Loving another person, or committing yourself to a cause or institution makes you vulnerable. It leaves you open to being hurt. If you never love, you will never be hurt and you will never cry, so don’t give your heart away.

Another strategy is to simply be tougher than anyone who might make you cry. Hurt the other person before he or she can hurt you. And if you do get hurt, deny the pain. Pretend there’s nothing wrong. Push those emotions down, way down! And keep them down. Don’t let them out! Ever! Tick, tick, tick.

It occurs to me that many churches get caught in that game of denial. We want churches to be happy, positive places. We want to come in on Sunday morning and see our friends; may be have our funny bones tickled a bit in the sermon, and pick up a few pious phrases we can recite all week; and hear a few affirming words letting us know what good people we really are; we want to sing a few old familiar hymns, and then go home pretty much the same people we were when we walked in, but happy and contented that we have done our religious duty, and knowing God is going to bless us real good for it. That’s what I call putting a band-aid on a gapping wound.

Long story short: when I was in sixth grade I used to watch the school nurse's office while she was out to lunch. One day a girl fell on the playground and had a really bad gash on her knee. The school nurse had said to me before leaving that day that she did not want to be disturbed unless it was real emergency. So I put a band-aid on the girl's cut and sent her back to recess. Out on the playground the girl "got sick" and one of teachers went and got the nurse.

The girl needed several stitches to close her knee. When the church refuses to see people's pain, and fails to name the cause as sin, we are failing our members emotionally and spiritually as I failed that girl. Often we are guilty of putting band-aids on gapping emotional and spiritual wounds, when deeper, more serious intervention is called for.

Jesus doesn't tell us to sugar coat things. He doesn't ask us to pretend problems and pains don't exist. He does ask us to expose sin and call for repentance. He calls us to proclaim his costly grace. God's people come through some real pain and loss before the happy ending where God wipes away all their tears. Poor old Lazarus even had to suffer the indignity of death so that the glory of God might be manifest, to say nothing of what Jesus would eventually suffer on the cross. The cross was unpleasant, yes, but O so necessary. Even Jesus was humbled before he was exalted. God won't make anything of us until we realize that we are nothing before Him.

We all have our own crosses to bear. The Word of God, God's law and gospel, pierces us like a surgeon's scalpel, laying bare all our hurts, all our transgression, all our sin-sick diseases. But that's a good thing. Left

uncovered, our sin would fester and become malignant, but through the painful surgery of repentance and forgiveness, we can be healed and made whole. Sometimes we must go through tremendous pain before the healing takes place. Often it involves tears and reopening old wounds that never really healed. But the healing will take place. God has said so.

Once I heard a pastor refer to death as the healing that only God can give, and I believe that's true. In this life, we often have to die to our old mistaken beliefs and attitudes. We have to die to the behaviors and ways of life that run us down. We have to die to our self-righteous attitudes that say we can justify ourselves before God. We have to die to the anger we cherish, anger at those we believe have hurt us. When we say, "There's nothing wrong with me, I'm alright," then we're all wrong. Only when we die to ourselves and our wants, and that's painful, can we live for others and live fully in Christ. We can only live in such a new and wonderful way by the grace of God.

Of course, we one day will die physically to this world and realize the fulfillment of the promises of new life God made to us in baptism. Then we will be free of the physical pain of this existence, the pain that haunts so many of us. Then God will wipe away our tears as our emotional and spiritual hurts will all be healed. On that new day, we will be raised up to die no more, and reunited with those who have gone before us, spending eternity in existence perfected. We will be together with God and all His saints, all our dearly departed loved ones, in a place of joy and refreshment. May that day come soon. Amen.