

GUEST ESSAY

This Is Why Jesus Wept

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By Peter Wehner

Mr. Wehner, a senior fellow at the Trinity Forum, is a contributing Opinion writer. He attends McLean Presbyterian Church in McLean, Va.

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Of all the qualities that the New Testament ascribes to God, compassion is among the most shocking.

Compassion has nothing to do with power, with immortality or with immutability, which is what many people think of when they contemplate God's qualities. The Greek gods of myth who lived on Mt. Olympus were defined by many things, but compassion was not high among them.

"For much of antiquity feeling the pain of others was regarded as a weakness," John Dickson, a professor of biblical studies and public Christianity at Wheaton College, told me. This comes to full flowering in the Stoics, he said, "on the grounds that this involved allowing an external factor — the emotions or plight of another — to control your own inner life."

Compassion, on the other hand, is central to the Christian understanding of God. Compassion implies the capacity to enter into places of pain, to "weep with those who weep," according to the Apostle Paul, who was central both to the early conception of Christianity and to the idea of its underpinning in compassion.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we're told many times that God is compassionate. It is at the center of the Jewish conception of God. But for Christians, there is an incarnational expression of that compassion. The embodiment of God in Jesus — the deity made flesh, dwelling among us — means that God both suffered and, crucially, suffered with others in a way that was a seismic break with all that came before. In the Gospels, we repeatedly read of the compassion of Jesus for those suffering physically and emotionally, for those "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

When a man afflicted with leprosy came to Jesus, begging on his knees to be healed, we're told that Jesus, "moved with compassion, stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.'" And he was.

This is an extraordinary scene. Those with leprosy were considered not just unclean, physically and spiritually, but loathsome. Everything they touched was viewed as defiled. They were often cast out from their villages, quarantined "outside the camp." In the words of the famed 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon, "They were to all intents and purposes, dead to all the enjoyments of life, dead to all the endearments and society of their friends."

People would avoid contact with those afflicted with leprosy. They were seen by many as the object of divine punishment, the disease understood to be a visible mark of impurity. Yet in the account in Mark, Jesus not only heals the man with leprosy; he also touches him. In doing so, Jesus defied Levitical law. He himself became "unclean." And he provided human contact to a person whom no other human would touch — and who had very likely not been touched in a very long time.

Jesus' touch was not necessary for him to heal the man of leprosy, but the touch may have been necessary to heal the man of feelings of shame and isolation, of rejection and detestation.

Kerry Dearborn, professor emerita of theology at Seattle Pacific University, told me her students found the most moving examples of Jesus' compassion to be his responses to outsiders, especially those deemed unworthy, unclean or unfit. "In taking on their 'outsider status' with them," Dr. Dearborn told me, "he reflected his deep love and solidarity with them, and his willingness to suffer with them." Jesus not only healed them, she said; he also took on their alienation.

In the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John, we're told that Lazarus, the brother of Mary of Bethany and Martha, and a friend of Jesus' whom he loved, was sick. By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had died and had been entombed for four days. Both sisters were grieving. Mary, when she saw Jesus, fell at his feet weeping. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," she said. We're told Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied. And according to verse 35, "Jesus wept."

"Jesus wept" is the shortest verse in the Bible and also "the most profound and powerful," the artist Makoto Fujimura told me. For him, those are "the most important two words in the Bible."

And understandably so. Earlier in John 11, we're told that Jesus *knew* he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, which he did. So Jesus wasn't weeping because he wouldn't see Lazarus again; it was because he was entering into the suffering of Mary and Martha. Jesus was present with them in their grief, even to the point of tears, all the while knowing that their grief would soon be allayed.

My daughter Christine Wehner, who originally suggested to me that Jesus' compassion would be a worthwhile topic to explore, told me, "Jesus wept because Mary was before him and her heart was breaking — and as a result, his heart broke, too." The Psalms tell us that God is "close to the brokenhearted"; in this case, Christine said, "Jesus doesn't just care for the brokenhearted; he joins them. Their grief becomes his in a remarkable act of love."

"Jesus ushered in a compassion revolution," Scott Dudley, senior pastor at Bellevue Presbyterian Church, told me. Before Jesus, compassion was primarily thought of as a weakness, he said.

"When Jesus says he is with us, that's not a metaphor or a trite offer of 'thoughts and prayers,'" the pastor said. "He's literally in it with us."

Dr. Dudley pointed out that in his suffering, Job says to God, "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?" In other words, *Do you know how hard it is to be human?* "Because of Christmas," Dr. Dudley told me, "God can legitimately say yes in a way no other god in any other religion can."

Renée Notkin, colead pastor of Union Church in Seattle, told me that "our daily invitation in living is to *be* with people in their stories. When I take time to listen deeply and to listen beyond the words spoken to another person's heart story, am I able to begin to cry with them? Not problem solving and not saying, 'I know what you mean'; rather simply weeping alongside in shared humanity."

As a Christian, my faith is anchored in the person of Jesus, who won my heart long ago. It would be impossible to understand me without taking that into account. But sometimes my faith dims; God seems distant, his ways confounding. "Faith steals upon you like dew," the poet Christian Wiman has written. "Some days you wake and it is there. And like dew, it gets burned off in the rising sun of anxiety, ambitions, distractions." And the rising sun of grief and loss, too. Those things don't necessarily destroy faith; in some cases, for some people, they can even deepen it. But they always change it.

During times of sorrow and times of tears, when it feels like we're "being broken on the wheels of living," in the words of Thornton Wilder, there is great comfort in believing God empathizes with our suffering, having entered into suffering himself. But we also need his emissaries. We need people who see us and know us, who enter our stories. Through their compassion and love, we feel, *I feel* — even if only partly — God's compassion and love. That doesn't eliminate the storms from within or without. But it makes greater room for joy in the journey.

Peter Wehner (@Peter_Wehner) — a senior fellow at the Trinity Forum who served in the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush — is a contributing Opinion writer and the author of “The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump.”

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