

First Lutheran Church, Aitkin
Interim Pastor Douglas Larson
Text: John 11:35 “Jesus wept.”

Sunday Sermon

January 12-13, 2019

Dear Friends in Christ, Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Jesus had three friends in the small town of Bethany just outside of Jerusalem: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Lazarus becomes sick and his sisters send a messenger to Jesus to come and heal him. For some reason, Jesus doesn't arrive until Lazarus has been dead four days. Mary and Martha are mad at Jesus, but eventually He asks, where have you laid him? They lead Him to the cemetery and then we have the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.”

That's what we often do when there is a major loss. We cry and so did Jesus. He cried, He mourned, He grieved at what had happened. If it is okay for Jesus to cry at a loss, then it is also okay for us to cry in times of loss.

In the summer of 1972, my wife and I were living in Boston, Massachusetts. I was taking a 12 week course called Clinical Pastoral Education. In this course, I worked as a chaplain in Boston City Hospital. I was part of a small group that had three others people and a supervisor. We wrote up accounts of visits with patients, discussed them in our group, and had small group dynamics and supervision individually with the leader. It was an exciting and challenging experience.

When there was two weeks left, Fred, our supervisor said that we would now spend time “withdrawing the investment.” It was a phrase he used to help us come to the end of our time together, acknowledge and affirm what had happened in our time and to speak to the others about what we had learned with and from them, what we appreciated or valued from our time with them and maybe even what we didn't like or had difficulty with them. The purpose was to come to the end of our time and tie up any loose ends and then be able to say goodbye and move on knowing we had said what we wanted to say to the others. Ending our time and moving on was going to be a loss of what we had and “withdrawing the investment” was a way to move on feeling good about our time together. Withdrawing the investment was not a way of ignoring or forgetting the others; it wasn't a way of denying or downplaying our relationship, but affirming, and valuing and then, strangely, being able to move into the future feeling good.

We have many losses in our life. I have a list of about 60 losses and there are more than that. We may lose a pet, an item we value, a job, a place we lived, people such as grandparents, parents, a spouse, a child, a brother or sister, a friend, a hobby or sport, a dream, a career. These losses affect us.

Here at First Lutheran Church, you have suffered a major loss in the last few months. Some of you knew since last spring or this summer or at least the end of October that Pastor Darrell was retiring and would be leaving this church. That's a major loss as Pastor Darrell had baptized some of you, confirmed some of you, officiated at your wedding, buried a family or friend. He had been leading worship for six years and you got to know and trust him. He was with some of you at some very dark and lonely times. He was also there at some happy and important times in

your life or the life of this church. His leaving could be very hard. His leaving could lead us to do the same as Jesus at Lazarus' death---to weep, to cry.

Crying is a God-given gift. Jesus cried. God made us to cry at times of loss. It helps. Back in the 1970's there was a record album called, "Free to Be, You and Me." It had some wonderful songs to help children learn about and understand their feelings. One song was "It's Okay to cry, crying helps the hurt go away." It's totally fine and understandable to cry as you think of Pastor Darrell's leaving.

Part of my job as Interim Pastor is help you with this loss; to give us permission to mourn and be sad. Part of what we need to do as a congregation is mourn Pastor Darrell's leaving us. Part of what we need to do is as my supervisor did in Boston in 1972:"withdraw the investment" from Pastor Darrell. That is not to forget, to ignore or to not think about Pastor Darrell, not at all. Rather, withdrawing the investment is to own and acknowledge the relationship we had with him. This is to celebrate the relationship. Some of you did this by saying to him that you were sad he was leaving, that you would miss him. Maybe you shared with him verbally or in a note what you appreciated about him and how you valued his ministry. These things are ways of withdrawing the investment, mourning the loss of what lies ahead, of grieving in a healthy manner and also celebrating what you had together. If you have wanted to share some thoughts with Pastor Darrell, you can still do that with a note sent to him. He would appreciate that. Or you can also just take time to think over these things and say a prayer of thanks for what has happened between you.

Pastor Darrell's leaving us was for his retirement and how can we be upset by that? Yet we may feel upset and that is okay, because we have a loss because of that. We also can be upset because we don't really know what the future will bring and how it will be here with an interim pastor and a potential new senior pastor.

Now it also possible that we don't have many feelings about Pastor Darrell's leaving. That is okay also. Feelings aren't right or wrong, they are feelings which reflect some things that are going on inside us. They are more like thermometers or barometers that show us temperature of air pressure. Knowing them, helps us plan things.

Another reaction may be that of happiness that Pastor Darrell left. After serving a congregation for almost 17 years, I announced I was resigning. Most people were surprised, some shocked, some sad and mourning. But I'm pretty sure, there were two families listening on the radio that day that jumped for joy and said, "Finally!" Not all pastors work well with all parishioners. So some here may be glad Pastor Darrell retired. And that is okay too. We are not bad people for thinking or feeling that.

Through my years of ministry and dealing with deaths, I have heard people say that they are mad and angry at the person who died. "How could they do this to me? Didn't they care? Do they know what this does to me, to us, to all we had planned?" Or something like that. We may be angry at Pastor Darrell for leaving us despite being happy for his retirement. We can feel both ways! It's okay.

To withdraw the investment is to think about the relationship we had with the person. To share some of that with them, if possible. It is to be sad, to grieve, and to be depressed-- that by the way is one of God's gifts to us, to depress our thought and feelings for a while in order to heal. There is nothing wrong with being depressed for a time and then knowing that we will come out of it and be able to go on again.

Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He felt bad, sad; he mourned and maybe was depressed. Jesus may have thought about the relationship he had with Lazarus and acknowledged it, affirmed it as good and then wished it could continue. It's okay to have any kind of feelings you have about Pastor Darrell leaving. It's okay to talk about them. It's okay to talk with Jesus about them, or another person or me, or Pastor Jordan.

The Lord Jesus who brought Pastor Darrell to First Lutheran Church is also the Lord who will walk with us and help us look forward in time to a new pastor, a new ministry that he or she will bring and new opportunities to work in God's Kingdom together. Jesus is the Lord of the Resurrection. He is the Lord of new days and for that reason He wept and then said in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out from the tomb." And Lazarus did, a sign of Jesus' power over death.