

After reading a gospel that long, I must admit that I feel like I have already preached half the homily. But I would like to take a few minutes this morning to reflect with you on the theme of connection – what I would prefer to call connectedness. Jesus’s connectedness to us, our connectedness to God, and, through God, our connectedness to each other.

I was speaking with a friend of mine recently about this story of the raising of Lazarus, and he told me of an experience he had in church camp one summer when he was an adolescent. He was at a week-long church retreat for young teens, and the first night when all the kids were sitting around the campfire, the counselor told them that each of them was to memorize a Bible verse for the next day. They could choose any verse in the entire Bible, but they were to memorize it and be ready to recite it for each other the next night. Now, my friend Scott, being a sharp and savvy kid, knew exactly what he was going to do. He went back to his Bible and found John 11:35 and memorized his verse: Jesus wept. He was fairly tingling with excitement the next night; he could not wait to show off what he had done. As they went around the circle, each student recited his or her verse while everyone listened fairly patiently and the counselor made sure everyone had a turn. Then they got to Scott, and with great glee and smugness, he recited “Jesus wept.” But instead of moving on to the next person, as had been the pattern that night, the counselor did something that he hadn’t done with anyone else. He looked at Scott and said, “So why do you think that was? Why do you think Jesus wept?” Well, Scott laughingly told me that that kind of knocked the wind out of his sails, but it also set before him a question that at some level he has been pondering ever since. Why did Jesus weep?

Scholars have been pondering that question for years, and there is no one simple answer. Some would say that Jesus wept out of his compassion for Mary and Martha and for their suffering at the loss of their brother. He is clearly moved by Mary’s tears and the tears of those around her. Others suggest that Jesus wept out of his own grief; the crowd in the story certainly thought this. (“See how he loved him,” they say to one another when they see Jesus’s tears.) Other scholars would say that Jesus was weeping in anger at the power of death made manifest before him. I can’t help but wonder if there wasn’t an element of fear

as well in his crying. After all, he had returned to Bethany where he had only recently been nearly stoned, and what he was about to do in this public raising of Lazarus would set in motion the steps leading to his crucifixion. He must have sensed the risk. Perhaps Jesus wept for all of those reasons, as most of our tears reflect a mixture of situations and emotions. I had a professor in seminary who professed that tears were often a form of prayer, a way of expressing what we cannot always even identify with ourselves, a way of sharing with ourselves and God what is at play in our souls. Perhaps what is important here in this story is less identifying why Jesus cried, but more that he did – that in those tears the gospel writer shows us Jesus’s deep connection to his own humanity and therefore his profound connectedness to us.

Jesus’s tears are not the only sign of connectedness in this gospel story. If we take the theme of imagination that we have been following this Lent, Jesus here presents us with a vision beyond what even Martha or Mary at first understands. Because fundamentally, Jesus takes on the last great divide for us – that of death – and shows his intimate connectedness to us in, through, and beyond it. In fact, that connectedness is so profound that death ceases to exist as a point of separation. Jesus hears of Lazarus’s illness and impending death, he waits until Lazarus is truly dead (here the number of days is significant since Jews believed the soul lingered around the body for up to three days after death, and Lazarus has been dead for four), and when the sisters express their utter confidence that Lazarus would have lived had Jesus been there to heal him, Jesus instead surpasses any hope or expectation and raises Lazarus from the dead. And just prior to this action, in his conversation with Martha, Jesus makes an incredible assertion. He says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” In Jesus, we are offered the most extraordinary thing – a life shaped by a continuous connection to God that overcomes even the certainty of death. All of life is, therefore, life in Christ. There is no place or state in which God is not present.

So how do we do live into that? How do we express that connectedness to God in our lives? Well, if this story teaches us that God has made possible for us the deepest connection imaginable, then it seems to me that our lives together are to reflect that spirit of connectedness with others. About a month ago, I attended a workshop for middle and high

school educators entitled “Making Schools Safe.” The focus of the workshop was making schools safe for students of all sexual orientations, and we spent a good deal of time talking about the harmful effects of bullying. Of the many presenters we heard, both students and teacher-administrators, what emerged as most important to students in helping to make schools safe was the presence of caring adult mentors and fellow student allies. Allies and mentors shaped the atmosphere of the community and made self exploration and personal integrity qualities that were valued and affirmed. Connection to others, therefore, was a key ingredient in the well-being of the individuals, both students and teachers, in the community.

Using the images then from this conference, perhaps one way we can express our connectedness to others in the body of Christ is to walk with one another on the pilgrim’s path as allies and mentors. Each of us can be an ally; all of us need mentors in the life of faith, prayerful partners to help guide our way. No one of us is Jesus, and we are not called to be perfect advisors or never-wavering allies. We cannot be. We are human. But we have the opportunity to live that connected life with compassion and purpose, allowing our lives, imperfect as they are, to be shaped by God’s never-failing desire to draw close to us and to all of humanity.

Just as that counselor around the campfire years ago served as a spiritual mentor for my friend Scott, so we also can be spiritual allies and mentors for each other, asking the guiding questions together and probing the answers of faith.