

Not without Tears

Thomas W. Currie
Georgetown, Texas

In a sermon essay entitled “To Hell With Acceptance,” William Muehl tells of a group of parents waiting in a church hall to pick up their nursery school children from their last pre-Christmas class session.

As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his hands the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which he had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew out of his grasp, landed on the floor, and broke with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child’s first reaction was one of stunned silence. But in a moment he set up an inconsolable wail. His father, thinking to comfort him, knelt down and murmured, “Now it doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter.”

But his mother, much wiser in such affairs, swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she wept with her son.¹

In telling this story, Muehl suggests that whatever redemption the gospel offers, it comes to us not by ignoring our tears or emptying them of their significance, but by receiving them, acknowledging them, even sharing in their misery. Jesus, after all, wept.

This past spring my wife and I, along with about 30 other folks, journeyed into the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia to learn something about the past that might shed light on our current understanding of the Christian life. We visited a number of churches, several of which were organized prior to or immediately after the Civil War. About half of these congregations originated out of the African American experience of the faith and are still rendering a vital witness today. The other half were largely white congregations often living out their mission in close proximity to, and even in historical entanglement with, their African American neighbors. The history was, as history often is, messy, and the engagement with these living embodiments of Christian witness induced both shame and guilt as well as a kind of tearful amazement and gratitude at the way the gospel gets itself proclaimed and heard in the world.

One of the places we visited was Liberty County, Georgia, where the Midway congregation was formed. That congregation no longer exists as such though its building has been kept in fine repair and its cemetery across the highway is still maintained. Interred there, among others, is Charles Colcock Jones, a former member of this church, who later pastored First Presbyterian Church in Savannah before serving as professor of Church History at Columbia Theological Seminary.² Jones inherited plantations in the Low Country and owned slaves himself. His education at Andover and Princeton and his own experience in a congregation where slaves also worshipped and could even be members led him to the conviction that the slaves in

the Low Country had souls that could hear and be redeemed by the gospel. Jones was no abolitionist, and it was only because his fellow planters trusted him that he was allowed to teach and evangelize the slave population in Liberty County. The planters thought, and perhaps he did too, that the Christian faith would make these enslaved persons more virtuous, industrious, and faithful servants.

When reading about Jones's efforts and seeing some of the residual effects still apparent from those days of slavery, one could not help but reflect upon the painful contradictions stemming from the suffering of those whose enslaved condition called into question every word of the gospel that was being taught and proclaimed. As a tourist, perhaps even more as a pilgrim, one felt more than a bit uncomfortable with this particular "means of grace," if that is what it was. The disparity between the church's proclamation of the gospel's good news and its comfortable acquiescence in, if not fervent support of, a culture of chattel slavery seems almost impossibly wide and ridiculously false. How could the gospel ever be proclaimed in such a setting? What hearer could ever receive the gospel's promises from one who could buy or sell him or her the next day? What preacher could ever proclaim such a word to those for whom the word bore such little relevance to their most obvious need? Was such a gospel so entirely discarnate that it could not even see the flesh before it? Could one imagine a more unpromising setting for the gospel's message to leap from one to another?

II

Sentimentality and pornography are deeply related, Flannery O'Connor reminds us, because they both seek to skip over the consequences of the fall and discover an innocence apart from the redemption wrought through Christ's suffering and death.³ It is our slow participation in his redemption, what our Reformed forebears would have called "sanctification," that cautions us against reading too quickly the hand of Divine Providence in whatever current outcome seems praiseworthy to us at the moment. Yet somehow the gospel was proclaimed in this setting, and even more amazing to relate, the gospel created its own auditors to hear its message and live out its claims even amidst the contradictions of the culture and in the face of that culture's systemic oppressiveness. How could that be?

Such a question is troubling, not just in regard to the past but perhaps even more when put to us in our own day. How do we proclaim the gospel in our time, in a culture still bedeviled by painful memories of the past and the all too present reality of racial oppression, conflict, and division? How do we proclaim the gospel in a culture bent on its own lethal self-justifications, its worship of wealth, its comfortable ability to ignore or dismiss the cries of others, its easy acceptance of the brutality of its own politics, the ruthlessness of its own getting and spending, the self-absorption of its own idolatries, and perhaps worst of all, its own quiet hopelessness? If we are honest with ourselves, or at least attentive to the gospel we preach, we must admit that it has never been easy to proclaim the gospel. To think that it might be proclaimed without cost is to enter that pornographic and sentimental "innocence" that O'Connor cautions us against. The cross, even in its forgiveness, perhaps especially in its forgiveness, cuts against an easy acceptance of the past, just as it refuses to allow us to "spiritualize" the work of ministry or render it sentimentally pious. There is and has always been a cost involved in this work, a cost that may well also discover for us an

unspeakable joy, but a cost that should make the bravest of us quail. And when we look at our own efforts to proclaim the gospel, just as when we look at the world of the ante-bellum South, there is ample reason for tears.

III

Scripture is well acquainted with tears, and not just the tears of lament or even the tears of weariness in the face of death. There are also tears of shame and regret, tears that acknowledge our own guilt and complicity in the death-dealing ways that make up so much of our lives. Such tears witness to and even describe the unreality of life apart from God's redeeming grace.

One place where these tears are spoken of is found in the eschatological vision of St. John the Divine, where he sees a new heaven and a new earth. These words are sometimes read at funerals or memorial services or on other occasions when the preacher would offer hope and comfort to the gathered saints. The vision is of a new world, even heaven itself, where, as the spiritual would have it, the saints have shoes and robes and are free to walk all over God's heaven. There, we read, there is One who will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4).

We might think that heaven would be tearless, but that is not what the text says. Evidently we will bring our tears, along with all our other baggage, before the throne of grace: our sufferings, our failures, our guilt, our pitiful efforts to do justice and love mercy, our regrets and sorrows and unbelief. We will bring all that with us, and there and only there will there be One who takes our tears seriously enough to acknowledge them and wipe them away. Our history, our culture, the good and the bad that makes us who we are, these things are not obliterated or ignored by God, nor are they dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant. Our history, even that part of our history of which we are ashamed, has a place in the Kingdom of Heaven, if only to be wiped away by One who is able to receive it in the ocean of his redemptive love, granting us a better vision that heals the eyes that are weeping and enables them to see a new heaven and a new earth.

Such an action of divine grace, far from "spiritualizing" our history or pretending that it never happened, invites us instead to embrace our past, tears and all, and to do so with a more generous heart and a more penitent spirit. There are tears enough that need to be wiped away in our own day, tears to be wept and tears to be acknowledged as such. Perhaps that is part of the reason the church exists, not just to name these tears or even offer them before God, but to share them with each other and to bear each other's burdens as we weep. The God who will one day wipe our tears away does not think they are insignificant. Indeed, his Kingdom comes in no other way.

Notes

1 William Muehl, *All the Damned Angels* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1972), 39.

2 For those interested in learning more about Charles Colcock Jones, see Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005). Dr. Clarke served as a resource for this tour.

3 Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 148.