

Story and Meditation: Weeping

August 16, 2020

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 45:1-15

by *Eric Anderson*

The koa'e kea had the reputation of being a crybaby, or rather, since he was a bird and not a person, a cry chick. All koa'e kea weep reasonably often, because they dive for food into salt water and the tears help clear the salt from their eyes. Of course, when this happens, they're all wet from the ocean water so who can tell?

This koa'e kea, however, tended to have tears in his eyes more than others. He had the habit, somewhat unusually among of his friends, of watching the sunrises and the sunsets closely. Look into the sun like that, thought his friends, and you'll tear up for sure. They thought his eyes might be a little oversensitive because after an afternoon of relaxing soaring around the summit of the volcano, his eyes would be moist again. "Too much wind for him, I guess," they told each other. "I'm glad my eyes don't do that!"

He particularly liked to soar in the rising column of air above the Kilauea summit caldera. "Too much Sulphur dioxide," they'd sigh as he teared up again.

As time went on, his friends noticed that he'd cry at other times and they were harder to explain. After a particularly good meal of flying fish it seemed like his eyes were damp longer than being on the sea explained. He'd circle over a grove of ohia in blossom with eyes no longer dry. When he began courting a young woman koa'e kea, he'd come back from their flights together in tears.

His friends shook their heads. He's just a cry chick, they said.

They didn't see one another as often for a while, because now they all had an egg in their nests to tend. The day that his chick hatched, they heard his cheerful cries welcoming his daughter to the world. They couldn't resist; as many as could took to their wings to visit his cliff-side nest.

There was the chick, looking pretty helpless and awkward with its damp white down, pink bill, and closed eyes. It didn't resemble the graceful flyer it would become in the least.

Predictably, the proud father was crying. Watching him, his friends finally realized why his eyes filled with tears so often. He cried for joy: the joy of flight, the joy of beauty, the joy of a delicious meal, the joy of love, the joy of life itself. On that morning he wept for the joy of a daughter, and for a daughter's future.

They knew because they cried those tears, too, in celebration of their friend becoming a parent, and later as they witnessed their own chicks hatching in their own nests.

I won't say that they became as good at weeping for joy as he did – birds are different from each other – but they never teased him for tears at a sunset, or soaring on a sunny afternoon, or the hatching of his children. They'd nod and sigh and rustle their feathers and know that for him, tears were the bearer of joy.

Joseph wept. Joseph had, I suspect, a long acquaintance with weeping. He'd been sold into slavery by his own brothers at the age of seventeen. Though initially he'd done relatively well as a slave in Egypt, becoming overseer of the household, he'd been unjustly accused of wrongdoing and imprisoned. He'd won the regard of first the jailor and then one of Pharaoh's chief servants, but he had not been freed for at least two years.

That's a lot of cause and a lot of opportunity for tears.

Since then, it must be said, he had done much better. He had successfully interpreted troubling dreams of Pharaoh as predictions of seven great harvests followed by seven years of famine. "God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do," he said, which was to store grain from the surplus years to carry them through the years of scarcity. Impressed, the king of Egypt promoted the slave and prisoner to be the chief minister of the empire.

Beth L. Tanner gives a summary of how Joseph met his brothers again in her commentary on *Working Preacher*: "When, a famine grips the region, Jacob tells his sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. They appear before Joseph who recognizes them, but they do not know it is him. Joseph does not reveal his identity; instead, he used his power over his brothers (42:9--43:34). First, he demanded they return with their youngest brother, Benjamin, and until they do he imprisoned Simeon. The brothers were sent home with the grain. Jacob would not let Benjamin go to Egypt because he had already lost two sons. But when the food ran out, and the famine was still severe, Jacob sent the sons back with Benjamin. After seeing Benjamin and sharing a meal with his brothers, they still did not know him. What happens next was either a test of the brothers or the second act of revenge, depending on how one sees it. Joseph instructs his servant to slip a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. Joseph then confronts the brothers about the alleged theft. The brothers beg Joseph to release Benjamin and Judah volunteers to stay in his place. It was then that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers."

It was then that Joseph "could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him."

These were not the tears of the teenager listening to his brothers sell him. These were not the tears of the former favorite son now working as a slave without hope. These were not the tears of the person whose word would not be believed, shed in a prison cell. These were not the tears of the dream interpreter weeping for a death predicted by a dream. These were not the frustrated tears of the prisoner who counted on someone speaking up for him and knowing that it had not been done.

That's pretty clear.

But they were also not the tears of an injured man plotting his revenge, even though Joseph had just set them up with the planted evidence of theft. They were not the tears of rage at remembered injustice or the tears which relished getting even. They were not the tears of satisfaction in his power and gloating over their weakness.

So why did Joseph weep?

He wept, I think, because Judah, who had originated the idea of selling him long before, now offered himself as a substitute for Benjamin. Benjamin was Joseph's only full brother. Both of them were the sons of Jacob and his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob had, it must be said, repeated the folly of noticeably favoring Joseph by doing the same with Benjamin. Something, however, had happened in the intervening years. Judah had promised Jacob before they left that he would protect the boy. In this moment, Judah fulfilled that promise.

It was exactly the opposite of what Judah had done years before.

The realization that Judah had changed changed Joseph. Roger Nam writes at Working Preacher, "Joseph moves from the position of authority into a dialogue of generosity. The subtle nods of resentment in previous chapters have disappeared. Joseph is eager to forgive and restore the family, not just for his generation, but for a dysfunction that permeated the earlier generations of Jacob/Esau and Isaac/Ishmael."

For a moment, at least, Joseph had been healed, Judah had been healed, the family had been healed.

That's why Joseph wept. It's why he wept so loudly that his attempts to hide it completely failed. If a koa'e kea can weep at a sunset, then a human being must weep for the restoration of a family.

I would guess that you have broken places in your heart and spirit that are come from broken relationships, from hurts and injuries and real pain. I do not urge you to simply "forgive," as if forgiveness were simple or as if renewing relationships is easy.

I do urge you to consider what you need to restore those relationships. What do you need as a foundation to build on for their repair? Do you need Judah to demonstrate that he wouldn't see you into slavery again? Do you need a direct apology acknowledging what you've suffered? Do you need restitution? Do you need some agreement on new ways to be together afterward?

What do you need?

What can you do to foster that? None of us can control another person – the most we can do is coerce them, and that has both its practical limits and very serious moral limits. Joseph, we note, created a very complicated situation with his brothers. I simply don't know what he thought its result would be. Was it supposed to be some kind of retribution or restitution? Did he expect Judah to do what he did? I don't know. The text doesn't say.

What I do see is that Joseph took a lot of actions that demanded a response from his brothers. He engaged with them. He stayed in contact with them. He spoke with them. How can you do that with the hurts of your life?

In the end, something they did satisfied that missing place in his soul and then he forgave them.

Those are the tears of true joy: not a casual, "That's all right;" not a half-sincere, "If I offended you, I'm sorry." Those are the tears of true joy, based on real change.

Those are the tears to work for and pray for and live for.

May all your weeping be for the renewal of your love.

Amen.