

Touched by our feelings

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of April 24-25, 2010.

By Hugh Buchanan

BOONSBORO, Md.—There is a scripture in the Gospels that I have never understood. I've studied the explanations in sermons and articles, but I've always thought the explanations were missing the mark. A profound experience taught me the lesson of this scripture.

I had a sad duty early in November of 2007. I had to accompany my wife, Boni, to the funeral of Wanda, her dear and lifelong friend.

Wanda and Boni had been close friends since sixth grade. Wanda was the matron of honor at our wedding, and Wanda and Boni remained in close contact after Boni married me and moved more than 100 miles away.

Advanced cancer

In the spring of the year Wanda discovered she had advanced breast cancer. We prayed for her daily and did whatever we could to help and support her. Sadly, Wanda died on Nov. 1, 2007.

At the memorial service I experienced something remarkable and unexpected. This experience lit up that scripture for me in a way that nothing except personal experience can do.

I had not been close to Wanda. I saw her only a few times, and I had known her for only six years when she died. I was not experiencing the same kind and intensity of grief Boni was feeling. I was serious and sobered by the nearness of death, but I was not gripped by the aching loneliness and sense of loss that the death of a close friend or loved one brings.

Drawn together

At the service Boni made eye contact with Wanda's sister, Cheryl. Immediately they were drawn toward each other at a run, as if a magnetic force was accelerating them.

They threw their arms around each other. Their faces both contorted into a grimace of anguish and grief, and their eyes filled with tears. Their bodies were wracked with sobbing. Never in my life had I seen such a spontaneous and intense release of emotion.

Immediately, in an uncontrollable torrent of empathy, which I did not anticipate, my throat choked, my eyes filled with tears too, and I had to draw in my breath in an involuntary sob. If I had not been ashamed to cry in front of 100 strangers, I would have lost control completely. Never before had I been gripped by an empathic reflex such as this.

Jesus wept

In that instant I completely understood this passage from the book of John describing the resurrection of Lazarus.

“Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept” (John 11:33-35).

Perhaps we have all wondered why Jesus wept. He knew that Lazarus would live again in a few moments, so He should have been filled with joy. I have heard that Jesus wept because of the lack of faith, because of the hardness of heart of those at the grave site.

I heard a more plausible explanation later: That Christ was crying from the grief that was a normal reaction to the death of a loved one.

I believed that until the memorial service. Now I know that Christ wept from empathy! Notice that it was the sight of the mourners’ weeping that caused the emotional response in Jesus.

Empathic reaction

The implications of this knowledge are important to us. Jesus was moved to tears because He sensed the mourners’ grief. His tears were an empathic reaction to the emotions of others. He wasn’t mourning the faithlessness of the people, and He wasn’t feeling grief over the death of Lazarus. Jesus Christ was overcome with empathy. This realization gives life to this scripture:

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus Christ feels empathy for us! He feels our hurts, our pains, our fears. He rejoices with us in our victory when we overcome. He delights with us when we learn something vital by combining our life experiences with the truth of the Scriptures, as I am convinced that I did at the service. Jesus Christ is touched by our emotions.

Help in time of need

For the rest of the day I had to reflect on the meaning and implications of the profound experience and realization that had come to me. When we know that Christ experiences our lives vicariously and that He is connected to us emotionally, we can have a greater appreciation for His willingness to give aid in time of need. He will be motivated emotionally to help us.

“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

We can see that the following scripture isn't only good advice for humans, it characterizes one of God's behaviors:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

God rejoices or weeps as the tides of His people's fortunes ebb and flow. We don't worship an unfeeling God who does not appreciate our emotional state. Our God is in touch with us and is moved emotionally by our lives. He is moved to act on our behalf.

I'm saddened by Wanda's loss, but I'm grateful for the experience that taught me about Christ's empathy for mankind. I also learned something about spiritual wisdom. It can't all be learned from a book. We must learn by living it, following in Jesus' footsteps.