

First Presbyterian Church
John 11:17-37, “Jesus, Our Friend in Grief”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/3/2024

Believe it or not, there’s a good chance that you are a saint.

Yes, you! You’re a *saint*.

Everyone who seeks God by faith is made holy
through the work of Christ and the filling of the Spirit
and is therefore a saint – a holy one.

The Sunday after All Saints Day (which is Nov. 1st of each year)
has become a special one in our congregation.

We take time to remember those we’ve lost this year,
and those whose departure is still felt from years gone by.

In such times of remembering these saints who have died,
do you ever wonder what God’s perspective is on their death?

Because God is, after all, in heaven.

Since God knows all about the life of resurrection that awaits
those who trust in Christ, does God really feel sorrow
at the death of our loved ones?

The story we read from John 11 show us that when it comes to death and grief,
Jesus sees the big picture of what God is doing through the resurrection
to make all things new.

And Jesus enters into the present reality of suffering and loss.

Jesus is our friend in grief because we need *both* perspectives.

Earlier I read what I consider the middle scene of a three-part play.

Back in the first scene just before our reading, Jesus receives news
that his dear friend Lazarus is sick in the town of Bethany.

Now, John makes sure we realize that Lazarus is the brother of Mary –
who anointed Jesus’ feet with perfume and wiped them with her hair –
and the brother of Martha.

You might know of the Mary and Martha story where Mary sits at Jesus’ feet
while Martha makes all the practical preparations for guests,
but also complains about not getting enough help.

This is a family that Jesus is extremely close with,
even in their sibling squabbles. Think of the people you know so well,
that you understand what they fight about with their siblings.
These are Jesus' good friends.

Early in the chapter, word was sent from Mary and Martha to Jesus by messenger
that the one Jesus loves – Lazarus – is sick.
Jesus and his disciples had left that neighborhood in Judea
a few days earlier, and it hadn't been very safe:
some people there actually tried to stone him.

The disciples aren't interested in returning at all.
It's going backwards and people there have violent intentions.
But Jesus says he will go back.

When your good friend is hurting,
when someone you love is going through grief,
you want to be there with them.

Additionally, grief often invites dark humor,
and that's what I think John gives us here.

Jesus looks at his disciples with that look he uses
when he's saying something deep and meaningful,
the one that indicates *they should read between the lines here.*
And he tells them in v. 11,

**“My disciples you must understand:
Lazarus is asleep, but I will wake him up.”**

The disciples ... lack the ability to read these nuanced expressions of Jesus.
They say in v. 12,
“Well, if he's sleeping,
don't you think that'll help him get better, Jesus?”
(“Oh, yeah ... sleep is good, I like to sleep when I'm sick ... oh, me too!”)

You have to imagine Jesus rolling his eyes as he turns back toward Judea in v. 14,
“He's dead, you idiots! But it's better this way so that you can believe.”

But it is Thomas—yes, good old doubting Thomas—who has the final word:
**“Well, okay, I guess we’ll go back and die
right along with you and Lazarus, then!”**

This opening scene of the Lazarus story
reveals that Jesus is by no means calloused toward the death of mortals.
He doesn’t just say, “Well, no big deal, I’ll see Lazarus in heaven.”
But he does see beyond our own perspective
when it comes to death and loss, mourning and lament.
Jesus sees the possibilities that lay beyond the realm of death,
what may yet come for those who have fallen asleep.
Because Jesus knows that God’s ultimate plan is *new creation*.
A new heavens and a new earth – and a new you.

By the time they arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has been “sleeping”
in the tomb four days.
(Now I’ve heard of someone rising from the grave after three days ... but four?)

Then, Martha comes out to meet Jesus on the road, while Mary stays back.
Visualize it. [REPEAT]

Grief and sorrow cloud Martha’s vision while walking down the road.
Her mind is full of platitudes and trite comments from greeting cards.
She can see nothing but the finality of her brother’s cold, lifeless body.
“If you had been here!” she says to Jesus, “My brother wouldn’t have died!”

That’s a prayer. And I think we’ve all prayed that prayer.
If you had been here, Jesus, my marriage wouldn’t have fallen apart.
If you had been here, my kid wouldn’t have died from an overdose.
If you had been here, Jesus,
my mom wouldn’t have died from cancer.
If you had been here, our world wouldn’t be falling apart.

How would you finish it? “If you had been there, Jesus ...”

Then Jesus of Nazareth, the second person of the Trinity,
says something startling to her, and to us, in our grief:

“I am the resurrection and the life.

**The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;
and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”**

Next, Mary also comes out to meet Jesus, and the crowd of friends and family follow her from the home.

John says that they all assume she’s heading for Lazarus’ tomb.

But rather than hurrying to a place of death and finality,
she’s hurrying to encounter the everlasting possibility
of the resurrection and the life. [REPEAT].

How many of us walk around in our grief and anxiety
expecting to encounter death,
expecting the worst, living in fear and bewilderment,
blaming God and anyone else who disappoints us,
when Jesus is right there declaring himself
to be the resurrection and the life?

She comes to Jesus and throws herself at his feet –
the same feet she had anointed with perfume, and she’s weeping,
and she says the exact same thing Martha said:
“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

She’s angry and grieving. Why didn’t he come sooner?
Doesn’t he love Lazarus?
Tears stream down the faces of her friends as well.

But this time, Jesus, who *is* the resurrection and the life,
doesn’t keep the experience of human grief at arm’s length.
Jesus enters into the pain of the moment.

In verse 33, Jesus of Nazareth, the fully human son of Mary and Joseph,
was deeply moved in his spirit and troubled.
He walks with them down to where Lazarus is buried,
and when he is shown the tomb, he wept.

Jesus wept.

Why, would Jesus be troubled in his spirit, when he had declared back in v. 4 that Lazarus would be raised in order to glorify the Son of God – that is, to reveal the true nature of Jesus? Why does Jesus weep?

Jesus wept because his friend had died, and he loved him.

Even though Jesus knew what was going to happen,
even though he knew this would reveal his true nature to the disciples,
he was a real person, drawn in by the emotion of the moment,
drawn in by the reality that his own dear friend had died.

And so he gives the command in v. 39, “Take away the stone.”
Jesus prays to God the Father, and called out in a loud voice,
“Lazarus, come out!”

And the dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen,
and cloth around his face. [This is, no doubt, the inspiration for many
walking-dead creatures in movies that were watched last week!]

A terrifying vision for us, but Lazarus was no zombie: he had been raised to life.

My friends, Jesus is the resurrection and the life.
But today let us also remember that Jesus wept.
He wept with Mary, and he weeps with you.

My own grief today is substantial.
I grieve with a dear friend whose pregnancy may have been stopped short.
I grieve with many in our community who have lost young people
to suicide or other tragic ends.
I grieve that many of our neighbors have to endure cold and wet without shelter.

And I grieve beyond the loss of human life:
I grieve the ongoing climate catastrophe which grows each year.
I grieve the political discourse of this country, which is vulgar,
and violent, and full of fear.

I grieve that whatever the outcome of the presidential election this week,
things are going to get ugly.
We have to be prepared for a difficult season
regardless of the outcome.

And in all these things, two things remain true:

- 1) Jesus, our friend in grief, is the resurrection and the life.
- 2) Jesus, our friend in grief, will weep with us, and walk to the tomb with us.

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To respond to God's Word, we will provide some space
to remember people we have lost
through the reading of their names and ringing a bell in their honor.

We will sing the hymn, "Oh God, Our help in Ages Past"
to guide our remembrance.

After the first verse, I will read the names of all those
we've lost in our congregation this year.

After the next verse,
we will also have a microphone available for people
to share the names of others they would like to recognize.

A bell will be rung for each name that is read.

Then after the third verse we sing,
I will leave space of silence for other griefs and laments
you may hold today.

Three bells will ring in symbolic recognition of those things.

When this time is finished, we will then draw near to Jesus, our friend in grief,
who communes with us and assures us of the hope of resurrection
through the Lord's Supper.