

The Graveyard Story and The Child Whisperer

Sermon titles for March 10 and March 17

John 11:1-53 – Chapter 25, pages 295-297

The Gospel of John is divided into two sections: chapters 1-11 are sometimes called “The Book of Signs” and chapters 12-21 make up the “Book of Glory.” Today’s text, the raising of Lazarus, is the seventh, climactic, sign and includes the fifth “I am” saying: “I am the resurrection and the life.” The characters Mary and Martha of Bethany appear only here and in Luke 10. Lazarus is a character who appears only in John. At the beginning of the story (295) when the family is introduced, Mary is identified as “the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.” That story does not occur in John until chapter 12, but the writer is making the connection between that story and this one. This also reminds us that the woman who pours perfume on Jesus’s feet/head is NOT Mary Magdalene---not here, and not in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, where the woman is nameless. The situation is spelled out at the beginning and the end of the short paragraph: Lazarus is sick. The quotation of the sisters’ message, “Lord, the one you love is sick,” has led some to suggest that Lazarus was the “beloved disciple,” who is never named in the Gospel, but who is referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” However, the identity of the “beloved disciple” cannot be known with even a modest degree of certainty.

Jesus delays for two days and then heads for Judea. At first the disciples with Jesus object to returning to Judea because of the fierce opposition to Jesus there. When Jesus tells them that Lazarus “has fallen asleep,” a common New Testament euphemism for death, they misunderstand and respond, “Great—let him get some rest and he’ll get better.” Finally Jesus spells it out for them: Lazarus is dead. Resigned, Thomas urges the others, “Come on, we might as well die too.” Note that Jesus has already decided to raise Lazarus: “I am going there to wake him up.”

Both Martha and Mary rebuke Jesus for his delay: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Upon being told, “Your brother will rise again,” Martha responds with the standard Jewish belief in the resurrection of the righteous dead---he will be raised “at the last day.” “Jesus makes his assertion, “I am the resurrection and the life . . .” The last part of this promise gives translators fits because the statement, “whoever lives by believing in me will never die,” is not strictly true. Some translators render the statement, “whoever lives and believes in me will not die forever.”

At this point, Martha confesses faith in Jesus as the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God. In the synoptic gospels this confession is made by Peter at Caesarea Philippi (see page 291). In John there is no scene at Caesarea Philippi---only the confession of Martha.

What details do you notice in the part of the story where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead? Why do you think those details were included? (page 297).

Some interpreters have seen significance in the fact that Jesus orders the bystanders to “take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Literally this means, “unwrap all those strips of cloth that bind his hands to his sides and his feet together.” Lazarus is alive, but he is still all tied up with the trappings of death. Jesus gives him life, but calls on his friends to help him get untangled so he can be free. Some have seen here the responsibility of the community of faith to assist the newly reborn believer to put aside the trappings of death so that s/he can be free to enjoy the new life that Jesus gives.

As so often in the Gospel of John, this sign causes division. Some of the witnesses put faith in Jesus and some plot to take his life. Jesus’s opponents are sure that all this healing and wholeness is really very bad for the people because Rome won’t put up with it: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” In other words, “We can’t have all this life breaking out all over the place. What the Romans can’t control they won’t tolerate. They’ll tear down our nice worship center.” Really? Jesus has defeated death and they are worrying about a religion that needs a building?

A word about resurrection

The people that Jesus raises from the dead in the Gospels actually do not experience resurrection, but resuscitation. They experience a super-healing; they are healed from being dead. However, they will still eventually die physically. Later in John 11, in a section not in our excerpt here, the religious leaders are making plans to kill Lazarus because he is such a powerful witness to Jesus’s life-giving power. Poor guy isn’t out of the grave long before people are planning how to put him back there.

This is quite different from the resurrection of Jesus that we will read about in chapter 27. Paul says in Romans 6:9, “Christ has been raised from the dead and will never die again. Death no longer has power over him.” This is quite different from the people that Jesus raises in the Gospels. There is no thought that they will

“not die again.” Of course they will, just like everyone else that Jesus healed. Jesus, however, was not resuscitated but resurrected. The difference is that he rose to an entirely different mode of life than the physical life he had enjoyed before the crucifixion. He can be recognized, but he is not limited by time and space as he once was. When Jesus wanted to get into a room before the crucifixion, he had to open the door or get someone else to open it. Now he just appears in locked rooms, as we will see in chapter 27. In Acts he leaves the earth by floating up out of sight. You don’t see him doing this in his original physical body. As Paul will insist in 1 Corinthians 15, there is a physical body and after the resurrection of the dead, there is a spiritual body. Not a spirit or a ghost or a vague grey cloud, but a spiritual body. If that doesn’t make any sense to you, welcome to the club. We will have to wait until Christ returns to see what that looks like.

Reflections on Christian maturity

How many times have we echoed Martha and Mary, “ Lord if you had shown up and done your job right, such and such would not have happened.” Notice that Jesus does not criticize them for being angry with him. It was his choice to delay and they are entitled to be angry. And so are we. If we believe that God’s power is unlimited we can never be complacent in the face of suffering, our own suffering or the suffering of a child on the other side of the world. “Lord, if you were on the job, AIDS would not be killing a generation of children.” “Lord, if you were on the job, nobody would go to bed hungry.” “Lord, if you were on the job, Scott Boulevard Church would not be closing its doors.” These laments honor God much more than the lame, “Well, God has bigger things to take care of,” or “That’s just not the way God works now.” Those remarks express a passive-aggressive stance, “I’m mad at you, God, but I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of showing it. I’m going to be a sophisticated modern person and pretend that I wasn’t even hoping that you would intervene.” Can we say with Martha, “You have really let me down, but all the same, you’re the only God there is and I’m sticking with you even when you don’t do things my way”?

What do you think about this paragraph? Is it similar to or different from what you have learned in church earlier? If you have tried this kind of honest prayer, what has been the result? Do you think you have grown in relationship with God or become stagnant? Unless the laments are spoken through tears of trust in God’s goodness, they can lead to bitterness.

Mark 10:13-34 – Chapter 25, pages 298-299

We will not have Sunday morning Bible study on March 17 because of the marathon. Pastor Julie will preach on Mark 10: 13-16 in OneWorship at 11:15 and that whole service will focus on the congregation's responsibility for our children.

Mark 10:13-16 - The Child Whisperer

This is a familiar story---one that has become so familiar that we miss much of what is going on:

- (1) It is not clear in the original language whether the disciples "rebuked" the parents or the children. But probably the adults are meant.
- (2) When Jesus responds indignantly, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these," there is more ambiguity. Literally the passage reads: "for of people like these is the kingdom of God." This could mean either, "the kingdom of God belongs to people like these," or "the kingdom of God is made up of people like these."
- (3) The next statement, addressed to the disciples and probably to the adults who had brought the children, can be translated:
"Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God as a child
(welcomes what is offered) will never enter it."

Or

"Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God as (I am teaching you to welcome) a child will never enter it."

In Greek the verb *dechomai* means both "receive" and "welcome" (similarly we call a room where people are welcomed a "reception" room.) Notice that Mark does not mention humility in connection with children, so we should not assume that is what Mark thinks Jesus was talking about.

Children in the first century For the lower classes children were the parents' free labor and their Social Security. The child mortality rate was high and among the upper classes in Roman society some children were not named until they were one year old; people did not want to waste a good name on a child who might die. There was no sentimentality about children and for the most part no indulgence. Children took on responsibilities in the family as soon as they were able. Children, like women, were property. In Roman law, the father had the right to kill any of his children at any age without fear of penalty.

* So if Jesus says, "welcome the kingdom of God as a child welcomes (what is offered)," he means something like this: Children welcome whatever they can get

with open arms. They are vulnerable and have no claim, even on their family property, until they become adults. You must realize that you have no claim on God's goodness; you do not deserve the kingdom of God but must receive it as a welcome gift. Otherwise, you won't be at home there in the kingdom.

* On the other hand, **if Jesus is saying**, "welcome the kingdom of God as (I am teaching you to welcome) a child," he means something like this: Listen up, disciples! I am reversing society's values. These children have access to me even though they have no status in society. They are important to me NOW, not because of their potential to contribute to the kingdom of God, but just because they ARE and someone has brought them to me. See how I pick them up and embrace them? That is how you are to welcome the kingdom of God. It will interrupt your routine. Kingdom values are inconvenient and they are not recognized as valuable by society, but unless you can embrace the kingdom of God no matter how inconvenient and counter-intuitive, just as I am stopping everything to embrace these children, you won't be at home in the kingdom of God.

Mark 10:17-31 – Wealth and the kingdom of God

In Mark's version of the story, a man (not young, not a ruler, but clearly rich) brings to Jesus the question that was frequently asked of rabbis: "Good teacher, What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus's first response was, "It's not about goodness. God is good and you are not. That's the difference between humans and God. If your goal is to be good, you already have the ten commandments. I can't really improve on those." (Some scholars claim that Jesus added the commandment against fraud, which is not in the original ten, because he knew that the way people got rich in those days was by defrauding the less powerful.) The rich man claims to have kept (literally "guarded for myself") the commandments from childhood.

So Jesus tells him "you lack one thing." Now that did not take supernatural insight. If the man had not realized that something was lacking in his life he would not have come looking for Jesus, since he knew very well what he had to **DO**. But he is hoping that Jesus will give him something else to **DO**, some task or merit badge requirement that, after he has **DONE** it, he will no longer have such a big hole in his heart.

"Jesus looked at him and loved him." That is the key to what follows. The call to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and come follow Jesus, comes out of Jesus's love for the man. It is not a punishment; it's a gift. Jesus sees that

the man is obedient to God's commands. He is serious about his faith. The "one thing" he lacks is the joyful freedom that comes from having nothing but Jesus. But he turns away. The offer is not worth the risk or the social stigma. After all, Jesus has a bad reputation and this guy has worked hard to maintain a good reputation. So he turns away. Readers of this story are quick to point out that the command to sell everything and give it to the poor is not demanded of everyone, just this one man. One commentator responds that those who are the most relieved by this loophole are the very ones for whom the commandment is meant.

Throughout Christian history there have been those for whom the command itself brought great relief. When Francis of Assisi heard these words read in church he rejoiced—it was just the good news he had been waiting to hear. There is a woman named Mercy in Nairobi, Kenya, who was a successful businesswoman. She put all her children through college, then she took all the rest of her money and moved into the Mathare slum to open an orphanage for children whose parents have died of AIDS. The joy on Mercy's face when she talks about "her" children is testimony to the gift of freedom in Christ. Jim Elliot, the missionary martyred by the Auca tribe, is quoted by his widow as having said, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Discuss this concept in your class.

Jesus goes on to have a discussion with his followers about the barrier that wealth presents to those who want to choose kingdom living. The reason the disciples are surprised is that a major (but not the only) theme in the Old Testament is that righteousness is blessed by God with prosperity. So, a wealthy person must be, or at least have been, pleasing to God.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." This is a proverbial form called "the impossibility." Some of you may remember a song with these lyrics: "'Till the rivers all run dry, 'till the stars have left the sky . . . I'll keep on loving you." The meaning, of course, is that since those things will never happen, I will never stop loving you.

You may have heard the story that in Jerusalem there was a low entrance called "the eye of the needle" and the only way a camel could get through it was to bow low. This was supposed to show that Jesus meant that rich people could get into the kingdom of heaven as long as they humbled themselves. The problem is that there was no such entrance in the time of Jesus. The story was invented several centuries after Jesus but, of course, was extremely popular among us

affluent people. There is a second-century apocryphal story about the Apostle Peter who was threatened with death by a rich man unless he did a miracle by shrinking a camel enough to go through the eye of a needle, thus validating the rich man's claim to be righteous.

But all that rigmarole is unnecessary because Jesus goes on to say that the salvation of the rich, although impossible for humans, is possible for God. But not guaranteed.

Peter, the Mouth, now reminds Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you!" (by contrast with the man who has just turned away from following Jesus. With a wry smile, Jesus assures Peter that whatever they have given up will be abundantly replaced and something else added - - persecutions! The replacement of family and homes "in this life" probably refers to the provisions shared by the Christian community. "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Since Peter was the first disciple called in the Gospel of Mark, this may be a warning against excessive feelings of security among those who "have left everything to follow Jesus."

What follows is the final "passion prediction." This one is more detailed and bloody than either of the two predictions that preceded it (see page 291 for the first one). It is so detailed that it can serve as an outline for the "passion narrative," the technical phrase for the story of Jesus's suffering and death.

John 11:55-57 – Chapter 25, page 299

The single paragraph on page 299 right before the summary in *italics* provides a transition to the story of Palm Sunday.