

March 29, 2020
Fifth Sunday of Lent

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“Look How He Loved Him”

John 11:1-45, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11

Part I What does the text say?

There is a new dimension to the ministry of Jesus in chapter 11 of John's gospel—the one he loves is dying. In all of the other signs, miracles, and healings of Jesus, there is never a mention that he loves the one he heals. No mention of Jesus' love for the blind man he heals (John 9:1-41). No mention of Jesus' love for the great crowd he feeds (John 6:1-14). Or in the first of Jesus' signs, the wedding in Cana of Galilee, no mention of Jesus' love for his mother or the wedding guests. In fact, Jesus is impatient with his mother when she says, “do something they have run out of wine” (John 2:1-11).

Is it Jesus' love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha that holds this text together? Mary anoints Jesus with perfume, an extravagant expression of love (John 12:1-8). The sisters send the message, “he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3) and it further says, “although he loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus (John 11:5, all three are mentioned), he stayed two days longer when he heard Lazarus was ill.” He delayed, not because he didn't love them.

And how *incongruent*, considering that he was about to raise Lazarus, that at the moment when Jesus reaches the tomb, he stops and weeps, and others say, “see how he loved him” (John 11:36). Love, divine love even, is introduced here, and is relevant as the story continues. Why does Jesus walk back into this dangerous region of Judea where they were seeking to kill him? (John 11:7, 8)

*There is a living, divine love dynamic in the story here we must not miss which sets the stage now for what is to follow. In John chapter 10, Jesus teaches, “a good shepherd loves his sheep and will lay down his life for them” (John 10:11, 15). Is he not doing now, himself, what he has just taught? He will lay down his life for his friends. Love, the love of the shepherd for his sheep, leads him to risk his life for his friend, and this risk of love for his friends leads him into grave danger from which he does not return. **The whole gospel—Jesus teaching, the signs he performs, the statements he makes as Son of God, the timeliness of his actions—all come down to love. So perhaps, the turning point of the Gospel of John is here, Jesus at the tomb, weeping for his friend he loved.** It is divine love, the love of the Father in Jesus that brings him*

to the tomb to raise his friend and signifies that the divine love of God in Jesus Christ raises even the dead.

Part II "I Love You"

Through the years, I have become convinced that the best word you can speak to one who is dying is to say, "I love you." Not God loves you, but I love you. I believe, because the spirit of Christ is in us, we can say, "I love you."

I remember the first time I decided to say this. A friend was in hospice and dying. Her liver had ceased to function and she was very near the end. She was lying alone in her room. I came in, said very little. Then bent down and whispered in her ear, "I love you." Suddenly her gaze shifted, she lit up, looked at me and without hesitation said, "I love you." At first, I thought it a little too intimate, but then I didn't. Was it the spirit of Christ, the love of God in Jesus Christ, that was expressed at that moment? Starting last year, I have begun using the phrase, "I hold you with the affection of Christ." It is the affection of Christ that draws us close with love for one another.

Part III "Why Did He Wait?"

Now we need to look again at the text to learn how we exercise love. I have a bad habit of ending any conflict quickly. I'll call someone and say, I'm sorry, when I had nothing to be sorry for, or I apologize when I have nothing to apologize for. And I work to convince myself that this is kindness. Take the blame, when it doesn't belong to you. Quiet the crowd, carry on your own shoulders the conflict, which belongs to many, but most importantly, get it over fast.

It is very difficult to figure out why Jesus waited two days before traveling to Bethany. He waits long enough until he is certain Lazarus is dead. He gets reprimanded by both Mary and Martha. Can you imagine the inner turmoil? *We have all experienced the waiting that is frequently required for divine love to do its work.* **We must learn to let love work independently of our own actions!**

The spirit of Jesus Christ, in our spiritual lives, goes ahead of us and is at work in ways much more profound than any action we can take. Throughout the entire ministry of Jesus in the gospel of John, he says over and over, my time has not yet come. Was there some kind of hidden providential timing of God that only Jesus knew and he needed to follow?

No, I believe it was when finally, the work of love had SO ARRANGED EVENTS that the glory of God could now be seen in the death of Jesus, the love of God seen in the cross of Christ, most dynamically and dramatically communicated to the world.