

Gospel Reading: John 11: 3:14-21

word count 1,784

A letter was once sent to a deceased person by the Department of Social Services in Greenville, North Carolina. It read as follows: “Your food stamps will be stopped effective March, 1992, because we received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.”

Today’s lesson from the Gospel of John suggests there will be a change of circumstances, and that is a concept that people wrestle with the world over, as do many of us in this room.

The reading is chosen for a day that most of us in the Protestant tradition grew up ignoring, that of All Saints Day. Like Ash Wednesday, this was a commemoration left to our Catholic brothers and sisters. Somewhere in the last few decades, the importance of setting aside a day to remember those important people who are no longer with us has crept back into our post-Puritan consciousness.

And, it is a good thing to face our fears of mortality together while lifting up the names of those who have passed on in the last year, as well as those who live on in our memories and always will, from year to year to year.

Tears of mourning were believed to have extraordinary power to comfort, sustain and provide healing. In fact, archeologists have found delicate containers called lachrymatory tear bottles for women and more masculine shaped tear bottles for men. They were often designed with an evaporation chamber. When the last of the gathered tears finally evaporated, the official mourning period was over.

I’ll post a link when this sermon is on the web site, to a place that has re-introduced modern day lachrymatory tear bottles for sale.¹ Some of them are quite beautiful, and there is one in particular that expresses a unique grief—a bottle with a pink ribbon for breast cancer.

Seminary Professor Leonard Sweet writes,

“In Roman times women were paid to cry into tear bottles, so that as many filled bottles as possible could accompany the extensive mourning processions that befitted any important, powerful figure. In typical Roman fashion, more was always better—whether one was dead or alive.

“Even the most humble burial ceremony involved the presence of paid mourners. In Jewish culture the bare minimum required two flute players and a professional wailing woman. Anything less was an insult to the family name. The grief industry in the first century—like that of the twenty-first century—was big business.

“Have you noticed that as the economy has fallen, the number of ads for life insurance are on the rise? In the face of an uncertain economic climate, unstable global relationships, catastrophic environmental scenarios, and butt-headed political stalemates, there is always one thing that remains certain . . . death. You can always bank on death showing up. The grief industry never has a down turn.”² Our preoccupation with being constantly at war insures it.

When Jesus finally arrived at Bethany the first-century grief industry was already well represented. “The Jews” who came down from Jerusalem to “console Martha and Mary” undoubtedly included many professional mourners, musicians, and trained tear-producers. They also represented family and friends—people who knew Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Many of them might also have known the deep friendships that these people shared with Jesus, and his love for them. He tarried—and came too late.

I listen more to the literary techniques, especially the foreshadowing that is in this story than to the claims it makes, but in the end, it is a story about wanting to know where God is when terrible things happen.

For example, in the Gospel of Mark, we recently heard about how blind Bartimaeus came to Jesus, and recognizing who he is and what he represents, had his sight restored. This story is placed before Jesus walked into the final chapter in Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is the only one who can “see” who Jesus is, and therefore his sight is restored.

In *John*, the mourners are talking about a similar time when Jesus healed a blind man, and wonder how it is that Jesus comes too late. The body has been in the tomb in the clear beginning of decay.

In this story, Jesus asks that the stone covering the tomb be rolled away. He thanks God, saying, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” Lazarus is raised from the dead.

Shortly after this happens, Jesus travels on to his own final chapter. In this one, he cries out, “Father, why have you forsaken me?” After three days, the stone is rolled away, and the tomb is empty. Three of the gospel writers point to a resurrection, and Mark’s ghostwriters add this ending on as well.

The story of Lazarus is a story of grieving the loss of a loved one. It raises the question of whether or not one can expect divine intervention to occur, and the disappointment one feels when it does not. It also brings hope in the face of death in Jesus words, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

What does a person of faith learn about being in the presence of death while hoping to find meaning in what eventually happens to us all?

I want to share a moving story Barbara Brown Taylor tells about her friend, and of living resurrection life in the midst of dying:

“I cannot hear this story [about Jesus’ raising Lazarus] without thinking of my friend Matilda, who died a little over six years ago. She had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, which means that she gradually lost control of all her muscles. Her face went first, then her vocal chords, then her legs. For the last year of her life, she communicated by writing on a slate, one of those erasable things kids play with. Sometimes she would get so excited that she would write and erase faster than anyone could read. Matilda found a lot to be excited about.

“Watercolors, for instance. When she could not talk anymore, she taught herself to paint, until her kitchen walls were papered with tulips, peonies, daffodils, hibiscus. When you went to visit Matilda, you painted. That was one of the rules. It did not matter if you had no ability, if the last time you held a paint brush was to put a coat of latex on your bathroom wall. Matilda stuck one in your hand, shoved a plastic egg container full of colors in front of you, and you painted. The best part was afterwards when she admired your work, sticking her thumb in the air and rewarding you with her loose, drooling grin.

“It was all I could do to watch her die. I wanted someone to walk into her room with a pill or a prayer that would cure her illness or at least halt its progress, but even if that had happened—even if Jesus himself had showed up to call her from her tomb—she would have had to die all over again later, as Lazarus did. It would have been a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it, resuscitation instead of a resurrection.

“Something bigger than that was going on with Matilda. Every time she lost something she thought she could not live without, she found out she could. First there was a painful void that

lasted an hour, a day, a week. Then something new moved in to fill the empty place: fresh series of paintings, a new friend, a deeper sense of the presence of God. "He is calling me," she wrote on her slate one day, 'like a bridegroom calling his bride.'

"Her resurrection began before she died and everyone around her saw it. When she set her cup down it was empty. There was nothing wasted, nothing left over to spill or lament. She died clean as a whistle, and several of the people who sat by her bed that day say their fear of death died with her. Having watched her do it, they believe they can do it too.

"Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate.

"What I, what all of us, have instead is a God who resurrects us by creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair—resurrecting us from our big and little deaths."³

The lessons that have been taught to us by those we remember today who have passed on has to be more than the remembrance of the pain and the void caused by their deaths. The questions are still there. Were those prayers unanswered? Did God come too late, or even at all? The ancients knew the power and the importance of tears of sorrow, and created special containers to hold them while we grieved. But nothing can contain the importance of the love and honor we hold for each of those special people who occupied such a place in our hearts—people who taught us what it meant to love and learn in this life. Each of them still lives, resurrected, in our hearts and souls.

But the story of Lazarus is not about a God who came too late. Jesus calls to God, and then to Lazarus, saying, "Lazarus, come out."

That ending to the story is the one we look for but do not receive. But instead of a God who came too late, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "What all of us have instead, is a God who resurrects *us* by creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair—resurrecting us from our big and little deaths." We are unbound. We have been taught how to live by the example of those whom we remember today.

Bring those faces with you to the table today. Bring your pain and sadness, and eat and drink hope. This is an open table, whoever you are, and wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here.

Sermon Resources

1 Lachrymatory tear bottles for sale today: www.tearcatcher.com/tearbottle.html

2 Leonard Sweet, "Tears are Our First Words" sermon, November 2009

3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, March 13, 1996, "Can These Bones Live?"

Scripture for Sunday, November 1, 2009

John 11:32-44

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." **33** When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. **34** He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." **35** Jesus began to weep. **36** So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" **37** But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" **38** Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. **39** Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." **40** Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" **41** So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. **42** I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." **43** When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" **44** The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."