

“The Prayer Closet”

July 22, 2012

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

District and Home Office, EFCA: the District will be led to the man the Lord has prepared to be the new Superintendent, the vision for mutual encouragement and new church planting will be maintained in the District, the National Offices, Agencies and schools will remain faithful to the Word of God and committed to gospel proclamation and kingdom work

President Obama: the Lord will give him an understanding mind and a believing heart regarding the gospel and the way of salvation; the Spirit will convict him of his need for Christ; the Father will protect and sustain him and his family and draw him to Jesus

The Board of Elders: these men will pray together, seeking the Lord’s face for direction for the continued growth of the congregation through effective ministries bringing Christ to our community and maturity to the believers

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: US Forestry Senior Firefighter, Challenge Adam Giordano (son of Tim & Laura): for safety, protection, and travel mercies as it is fire season. Also he is in the process of training to earn his B License in which he needs to not only know how to drive the fire engine but also how to operate it.

Young Adult of the Week: Alexis Ewing at Butte College: that her financial aid come through and that the Lord’s direction for her future be clear.

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Carol Bernerd, Al Billington, Bob Boettcher, Harley Chapman Sr., Diane Kinnamont, Carol Koehler, Roseanne Lane, Larry McFall, Dick & Jane Miller, John Montgomery, Fred & Jean Pauly, Phil Peterson, Jean Price, Cindy Rodney, John Stancik, Wally Yates

(please call the office to request updates to this list)

The title of the message is “Paradigm”. The text is John 11, and you notice it is verses 1-45, so I trust most of you brought lunch! This is a narrative section and all of those verses describe the single event which is the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

What is a paradigm? Here is the dictionary definition of a paradigm: “a listing of all the inflections (forms or ways of using) of a noun or verb taken as a model.” What has got to do with Jesus? Jesus is the paradigm for us. As we study Him and listen to His words and see Him work with His disciples and with the population of Israel in that day, we should gradually come to understand that He is living in front of us what it means to be a man of God in the service of God. As we study this particular event some of that will come home to our understanding.

I suspect quite a few of us are familiar with the content of this chapter. It is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It would be reasonable to assume that the chapter is about the amazing power of Jesus to raise people from the dead. But in fact that is not what the chapter is about. There is no question at all but that Jesus has the power of raising people from the dead: that is not at issue, but that is not what the chapter is about. If you have a bit more knowledge or are bit more thoughtful about scripture and its emphases on the thing which it sees to be of primary importance, you might say that what this chapter is about is the power of Jesus over spiritual death as well as over physical death. That is also true, but it doesn't yet get us to where we need to be to focus on what the chapter is actually bringing home to us. What is the chapter about? The chapter is about God's love for us and our love for God. That message is brought to us in the context of what you and I, were we directly and personally involved, we would say this is a massive crisis in the life of these particular people, and it is a crisis on multiple levels. I prepared this message before I learned of the situation with the Boettcher family, but I can imagine that if you just think of Bob Boettcher and he is Lazarus, you think of Karen Boettcher and she is Mary, you can probably begin to let the inner dynamic of what it meant to be there and hear these things and to try and absorb them so you understand the grace of God and the will of God. That is just a real good way for us to get inside of this event.

Here is the event; I will read a little bit of it to start off with:

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?’ Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him. After saying these things, he said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.’ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him. So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’”

If you paid attention, this is just odd. Whenever you encounter something in the Word of God that is odd, that makes you feel like there was an editor's error or something, that is a good time to back up and say, “I want to make sure I got it.” The first thing to do when you read through here is to take note that when John says that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus, (in the fifth verse it says that), and in the fifth verse it says “agape”. If you drop on down to the 36th verse of this chapter where it again says “love”, it uses the [Greek] word “phileo”. So it is interesting to take note that there are two distinct loves being spoken of, or at least two words being used which we translate as love. It is essential that we recognize that Jesus was saying something other than what we generally mean

when we say that God loves us. You can go elsewhere in the Scriptures and in chapter 13 of John’s gospel, verse 23, he uses the word “agape”. He says, *“One of the disciples whom Jesus loved [agape] was reclining at table close to Jesus.”* The expression appears again in the 19th chapter of John v. 26 where he uses the word “agape” and in the 20th chapter v. 2, where he uses the word “phileo”. These are those verses: *“When Jesus saw his other and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby. . .”* Then the last: *“So [Mary] ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. . .”* There are other references, but this is enough for us to see these two terms being used back and forth. What do they mean? In Greek when you read the word “phileo” it normally asks you to think in terms of brotherly love, or as is on the screen, this is a love that has a special attachment or fondness or affection distinct from the love which you might have for all men in general. What the use of this term indicates is that the person who is loving, loves with a particular interest in the specifics of the individual that they love. What we are being told here is that Jesus’ relationship with Mary and Martha and Lazarus and the other disciple that He loved, which we know is John, that His relationship with those individuals was distinct, that He had a special affection for those particular individuals that was different than He had for the rest of the disciples or that he had of course for the rest of mankind.

That may be unsettling; how many find that unsettling. Whoa! The normal human response is, “What about me?” However this should not unsettle us; it should in fact encourage us. The first thing it does is it helps us to remember what we should never forget, and that is that Jesus was a man, a distinct, specific individual. As such it was not possible for Jesus to know all men equally; He couldn’t even know all twelve disciples equally. He knew some very well and loved them. He is committed to the good of all, but His affections do not embrace all in the same manner, as a man. Being committed to what is good for the other person is what is termed a moral or principled love. That is “agape”. This is not primarily an emotional form of love, but primarily it is an act of the mind and the will rooted in our experience of the loving kindness and goodness of God. All of us are loved equally in this manner.

This is the love that Jesus refers to when telling His disciples in John 15:12-13, the commandment which we will go into later on: *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* What kind of love is that? It is a moral and principled love. It means I am committed to doing the best for you. What if I find some of your personal habits irritating? Do any of you have anybody that you know that irritates you? If I irritate you, tough! What Jesus says here is that you have love me just like you love your favorite person, the will, the desire, the determination, the commitment to do the very best for that other person, even if you find them somewhat irritating. *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* The verb “phileo” is often translated as affection or friendliness. It also means to love deeply. It is the love that forms brotherhood. It is a particularizing love. Scripture uses the terms to distinguish these differing kinds of love, but clearly they cover common territory. True affection will include the commitment to do what is good on behalf of the one you love.

There is something else for us to gain here. Just before His betrayal and death as recorded for us in John 16:7, Jesus says that it was to our advantage that He would die and go away. For only if He does could He send back the Holy Spirit. I suspect that all of us know this; it is part of a general understanding. What we may not take full account of is that when the Spirit comes, He comes as our friend. I want you to think about that. The Spirit comes as our friend. The love of God for us through the Spirit is not a general or universal or abstract kind of love. It is highly particular; it is very concrete. The Lord is not indifferent to the things that matter to us. Sometimes, my observation is, if I am a Christian then the only things that should matter to me are the things that I find written down in Scripture, but what I think we need to understand is that God is interested in everything that you are interested in, because He is your friend. So, let me ask you some questions: if a friend stopped by your house, someone who loved you, how would they treat you? How would they treat them? How would that friend respond to what troubles you, or to what made you laugh, or what perplexed you? If a friend were to come in to the place where you were at, would your friend want to make eye contact with you? If you were both going to a pot-luck, would

your friend want to sit next to you? Do you know who sat next to Jesus at the last supper? It was His friend John, because they were friends. A particular kind of love that delights in what you delight in, that draws close and wants to be involved in all the particulars of your life, because He is your friend: this is the love of God for us in the Holy Spirit. We need to keep this in mind as we read this account of the death and the raising of Lazarus, for Lazarus was not just someone who died; Lazarus was the friend of Jesus, a man He loved as a friend.

I drive that home so that we can catch something of the dilemma that the disciples would have experienced as they are with Jesus and they watch Him respond to the request that comes from the sisters saying, ‘Lazarus, whom you love, is dying,’ and Jesus says, “Let’s hang here for a couple more days.” Knowing this makes what Jesus says and does even more strange, at least on the surface of things. Jesus does not appear to treat Lazarus and his sisters as friends! Learning of Lazarus’ illness – we do not know what it was but we know that it was mortal for Jesus talks about that right from the outset – Jesus decides to stay for two more days and not go. After those couple of days He says, “Let’s go.” I want us to think about that. Have you ever gone thought that with the Lord? Have there been times in your life when you pray and there is silence? Have there been times in your life when you look for His arrival and He is absent? The natural supposition is, “He doesn’t love me! I have been forgotten! He has shoved me aside! I am not on His agenda! I have small significance to Him, if any.” Again, this is not the way a friend treats a friend! I suspect that many of us have been here. What do we think Martha and Mary are thinking when Jesus doesn’t arrive? Or what do we think His disciples are thinking when He doesn’t do anything?

I am going to pull away from the emotive level which I am wanting us to track on, because I think it is the right level to track on, and I am wanting us to step back from the emotional intensity of the event and reflect for a moment on what actually is set down in front of us in the larger context of John’s Gospel. For you see it is essential in understanding the event, as well as for understanding our lives, to understand that many things happen at once. What this is I am going to put in front of you four levels of drama. The intention of laying them out is to counteract the normal response we have when we feel like we are being neglected by God. When we feel like we are being neglected by God, I don’t know about you, but I know about me really well, I feel like, “Owe! Me, Me, why not ME!?” I told you I was irritating. I do that in humor, but the reality is that under the impact of these kinds of crises where we feel abandoned, our attention naturally focuses in on ourselves and our sense of loss and disorientation, because what we thought we could rely on is gone: “Oh my goodness!” So we can become intensely occupied with ourselves in those circumstances and forget that many things are going on at once. Here are the four: Obviously the one that comes rapidly to mind is, “what is going on between Jesus and His friends? What is happening here in the face of a mortal illness and He doesn’t show up? There is another level; that is the relationship that Jesus has with His disciples. Notice that that is the context, this whole thing happens with Jesus and the disciples gathered around Him and He is in dialogue with the event and they are in dialogue with Him about the event. Not only does the situation with Martha and Mary and Lazarus come in here, but there is also the situation that the disciples are observing as Jesus is dealing with those religious authorities who desire to kill Him. To respond [to the sisters] He has to go back to within two miles of Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem is where the power center is that wants to destroy Him. That is why, when we read the account, we see that Thomas says, “Jesus, you don’t want to go back there; they just tried to stone you.” So the natural supposition that the disciples figure is that Jesus didn’t do anything because He didn’t want to go back and get stoned. That is the second level. The third is the relationship between Jesus and the prophetic announcement that He is making to the people of Israel in general regarding the coming close of the kingdom. They are profoundly confused about what that kingdom is going to be, how it will function, what it will mean for them. The last level is Jesus as a part of the plan of God for the salvation of humanity. We know when we read the Gospels that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to die.

Going back again to His dialogue with the disciples, for them certainly a strange message is being sent, a kind of double message. On the one hand Jesus seems willing to treat these friends indifferently if not cruelly. But on the

other hand, notice, once He is sure that Lazarus is sleeping or dead, He says, “Ok, let’s go back.” So now all of a sudden He is willing to face death just to go back and comfort them when He could have gone back earlier and prevented death! I hope you can get inside of this. This is just difficult.

Coming down to John 11:9-10 we pick up the narrative again. Jesus says this in response to their concerned about going back and getting killed. Jesus responds by saying, “Well, you know there are twelve hours in the day, and if anyone walks in the day he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world. But if he walks in the night he stumbles because the light is not in him.” Great! What Jesus seems to be saying is that the time has come to act because it is day. But the time in which to act is limited: there are only twelve hours in the day. You don’t do in the night what can only be done in the day. If you try, you will stumble. That is the literal level. Having read John’s Gospel up to this point, we already know that Jesus spoke of the light in a spiritual and moral sense. Consequently we know that Jesus is the light. When He says you can only do in the light. . . we can only do some things when Jesus is present, because He is the light, and those same things cannot be done when He is absent, for when Jesus is absent, it is night. Jesus’ presence is the day, and His absence is the night.

Under the circumstances this is a fairly penetrating comment. Don’t go where Jesus isn’t. And wherever you go, be sure you go with Him. Because if you don’t [go with Him], no matter what it is you intend to do, you will fail. But if you go with Him, even if they want to stone you at the other end, you will succeed. That is what He says. “I am the day, this is the light. Let us walk into the very presence of those who want to kill Me.”

Having made that rather enigmatic [statement] – I am not sure the disciples would have gathered all that in immediately – in John 11:15, Jesus now clarifies the situation with Lazarus. He says he is asleep, they think He means sleep. He clarifies and says “Guys, Lazarus is dead.” Again I want us to step inside [the event]. The disciples all knew Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They had all been in their home. They would not have responded to this like, “O, here’s a good theoretical problem.” This is a friend of theirs who has just died. I think for them this death of Lazarus is but the prelude to the death of Jesus, and the death of everything they have hoped for. Notice what Thomas says: “Let’s go – not to see the victory of the light: notice what he says – and die with Him.” The disciples had to have been bewildered. They have seen all kinds of dramatic miraculous things done by Jesus. The thing that must have puzzled them, maybe almost paralyzed them, is that for some reason Jesus chooses not to use His power. Have you ever sat in a hospital waiting room and ask yourself, “God!?” Sure you have. So did the disciples, and so, of course, did Martha and Mary. We know that the ultimate reality of Jesus’ conquest of death in the resurrection is hidden from the understanding of these men. We are told this repeatedly in the Gospels. They are persuaded therefore that Jesus is going to die, and that when He does their hopes and dreams die with Him. So we face with them this reality: there are times when God seems to take us deep into the valley of the shadow of death and leave us there.

I heard about another pastor: I was just curious to know what was going on, and here is the comment made by someone who had reason to know. The pastor tends to sugarcoat everything. The difficulty with sugarcoating in your preaching and teaching is that nobody lives there. You don’t live in Candy Land. You live in places where your life goes into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and you wonder where God is; and there is no answer. That is the reality, and there is no point in gathering together as a body of believers and promoting fantasy instead of letting the Gospel bring you into the presence of the Living God who deals with the truth, which is why He died on the cross so that you and I would have the strength to do that, and to stand by those who don’t have the strength, and they need help. The end of this is that men say, “We are going to go with Jesus.” That is a hard choice. That is why this is a paradigm. I don’t understand, I don’t see the power of God, but I know Jesus is the light, and where He goes I will follow, because I will not stumble if I am with Him. That is a hard choice, but we must follow.

We go down now to chapter 11:16-22. That is surely where the disciples were when Thomas spoke as John writes, *“Let us go with him that we may die with him.”* We are left to imagine what the disciples thought, felt and said to one another along that journey, a journey which would have taken them at least a couple of days from the Jordan Valley to Bethany. The rumor of Jesus’ arrival preceded Him, reached Martha and Mary before He did and Martha goes out to meet Jesus as He is arriving. John says in verse 19, the expectation of everybody was the Jesus had come to console them in the loss of Lazarus. To console is to help someone to accept and adjust to loss. That is what console means. Nobody had any anticipation or thought that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, even though He had raised others from the dead. That raises another question: what is going on in Jesus’ mind? Why would He do this? Why would He deliberately let him die, knowing He was going to come back and raise him from the dead? Did you ever ask that question?

Beloved, here is another step back. There are three considerations. God wants to know and we to know, do we trust and love Him, or do we love what we have? The classic, of course, is the story of Abraham and Isaac. God never intended to have Isaac slain, but Abraham didn’t know that. How many of us can tell stories about our lives where something we had and we thought was wonderful and took it away? Why did He do that? A second, do we trust that what will be, will be better than what is. Do we trust that it will be better in the end? Do we trust God? I imagine, I haven’t talked with Mrs. Boettcher, but I imagine that she has had this question in her mind. I know that Bob did. I had a chance to talk to him. “What if I die?” “It will be better.” “What do you mean it will be better? I will take care of my wife?” “It will be better.” “How can you tell me it is going to be better?” “I can tell you it is going to be better because I know God. God is the light. When the light shines you don’t stumble.” “That is very hard!” “You are right, it is hard; it is exceedingly hard. But it’s true.” The third one, do we remember that God is doing many things at once, and we are only a small part of a large whole. Beloved, it is never all about you; it is always about many other things at the same time. It is good for us to remember.

Why did nobody think that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead? It was a very practical reason and Martha is the one who points it out: he’s been dead and buried for four days and she expressed the fact by saying, “It is going to stink.” By now the body is rotting. Martha is a practical woman. However notice in vv. 21-22 when she first meets it sounds like she is open to great possibilities. Martha says to Jesus, *“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”* How often, beloved, are our hopes incoherent, clashing with our convictions as to what is real and possible. Surely Martha is hoping that Jesus will bring back Lazarus from the dead, even though he’s been dead for four days. But when Jesus proceeds to take action and goes to the tomb, what does Martha say? “It is hopeless; can’t possibly do it.” Did you ever pray for a miracle and then declare your own prayer to be foolish? That is what Martha has just done.

There is a natural inclination to understand Martha’s statement in verse 22 as a kind of faith affirmation, an insight into the true power of Jesus as a Spirit filled prophet of God. But I think that that is probably incorrect. We are closer to the mark that we understand her words to mean that she knows Jesus is her friend, and that he is a wonderful godly man, and that whatever He asks God to do by way of comforting and strengthening, God will do. In other words, she is operating according to the religious sentiments of her day. Jesus addresses this in v. 23. Notice what we read in v. 22. She says, *“Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give to you.”* Martha says, Yeah, I know he is going to rise again at the end of the age. In v. 15, Jesus says, *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* Do you notice the tense of the verb? I am. Martha is not hopeless, but her hope is pushed to the end of the age, relegated to a time that has little bearing on present events. “God is great, God is good: and a hundred and twenty eight years from now when we all rise from the dead it will work out. In the meantime it is up to us to work it out as best we can.” What do you think? The affirmation of an eventual...empties the present of any actual, and we live like every lost person on the face of the earth, relying solely on our own strength of mind and body and expecting nothing from God.

Jesus does not want that to be Martha’s understanding. Jesus’ words bring life and death forward with intense immediacy. I want you to imagine in your mind that you are Martha and you are standing there and you are looking at Jesus and Jesus is standing in front of a rock and the rock is closing off a tomb, and in the tomb your dead brother is lying and you listen to Jesus say these amazing words. *“Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”* “Though? Though? Like, maybe? Like, what if? He is dead!” “And even if he dies, he shall live again.”

It is the intent of God [for us] to realize that faith in Jesus Christ brings a new dimension of life to the believer which is beyond the reach of death. This is what is given to the believer. It is eternal life. This is our fellowship with the One Who is our Friend, the Holy Spirit. As we have gone through these chapters of John we have seen that the relationship we have with God is life giving. Quite literally God is imparting His eternal life to us, and he is transforming us by His truth. Jesus is preparing Martha for the work of the Spirit which will begin after his death and resurrection. It is doubtful that Martha at this point had any proper understanding of what it meant to say that Jesus was the Son of God who is coming into the world. She probably knew that Jesus was greater or more than just a prophet, but that she understood Jesus to be the incarnate person of the Trinity would have required a special revelation from God for her to know that. It is not impossible, it is just unlikely. As we read in v. 28, Martha still thinks of Jesus as a teacher. Martha said to Mary, *“...the Teacher is here and he is calling for you.”*

John’s account shifts now to Mary. Mary had a very different temperament than Martha. Martha was a practical woman who got things done; Mary was willing to let practical things go by the board in favor of good teaching and close fellowship. But John is not writing a gospel about Mary. What we learn in this little paragraph is the depth or power of Jesus’ feelings in response to the death of someone He loves. He knows He is going to raise him from the dead, and yet how does Jesus respond to the death of Lazarus? He weeps. And when He stands in front of the tomb, we are told in the Greek He is deeply moved. The term refers to someone being gripped within by the depth and power of his particular feelings. Grief is a manifestation of our love: we should neither force the tears of grief, nor suppress them. Jesus was grieved that His friend endured something so awful, and we should be as well.

In John II:38-44 before Jesus calls Lazarus from the tomb He says to Martha, did I not tell you if you believed you would see the glory of God? Jesus then lifts up His eyes and says, *“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.”* Jesus has the power to cancel death, even when we are in the process of decay. Why is that important? Jesus wants us to know that He can make of us new creations. I do not know all of you well enough to know how you struggle against the continued presence of sin in your life, or perhaps some here don’t believe you can be saved. It is not true. God can raise a rotting man from the grave; He can transform your soul. As we understand this, beloved, what I believe we need to understand is that this is to see the glory of God. We are privileged, you and I, to see the glory of God as we look upon the face of those who have been redeemed from the dead, by His grace.

Let me cry to the Lord: Father in heaven we give you thanks for this incredible story. No, no, no: it is not incredible, it is believable. In fact it is the heart of our faith to know that You are the God of life Who conquers death, both in the eternal future and right now in our lives. Thank You for Your gracious goodness to us; may we be hope filled, joy filled, thankful because of Who You are. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you ever wonder if God’s love for you includes all the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of your life?

2. What tells you that someone considers you a friend and how do you go about being friendly?

3. Do you think of the Lord as a friend? Have you ever been perplexed or even hurt by the silence and seeming absence of the Lord when you felt you needed Him?

4. In what ways – or can you give some examples of ways – has consciously relying on Jesus (or the Spirit) brought clarity for understanding and direction (“light”) for your life?

5. “Are there not times when God seems to take us deep into the valley of the shadow of death and then to leave us there?” Comments?

6. Have you found your “practical” knowledge of the world at odds with faith inspired hopes in your life?

7. Do you find yourself tending to see God’s salvation as coming at the end of life and that you are pretty much on your own in the meantime?

8. In what ways has daily communion with God through prayer, meditation, reading the Word, worship and conversations with others brought renewed strength and wisdom in your life?

9. Are you a Martha or a Mary type in life and faith?

10. Do you believe God will enable you to live forever?