

March 22, 2015
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from John 11:1-16.

1. How many accounts are there in the Gospels about Mary anointing Jesus?
2. If Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, why did He allow Lazarus to die?
3. What did Jesus teach about walking in the daylight?
4. How have you demonstrated the resolve Thomas spoke?

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS **John 11:1-16**

David tells us that righteous people do not take up a reproach against their friends (Psalm 15:3). He concluded that it is right to grieve along with a friend (Psalm 35:14). His son Solomon told us that, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). That wise man also talked about a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).

The “Friend” Solomon spoke about is best revealed in Jesus Christ the Son of God. He called the disciples who followed Him most closely His friends (John 15:14). According to the passage before us, as well as other texts in the Gospels, Jesus was a good friend with a man named Lazarus. He, who had healed dozens of people in about three years of ministry, allowed His friend Lazarus to

die. That doesn’t sound much like a friend who loves at all times and is born to help in times of adversity.

A real friend and genuine friend desires for us to attain the best in life. If we are talking about the divine friend, God the Son, we must remember that He knows what is best from the perspective of our Creator. God who made us has a standard of goodness, success, faith, and righteousness that we often cannot even imagine. To achieve such standards of right will require that we learn important lessons. Because Jesus is the perfect friend, He teaches us those important lessons. Let the disciples show us how in this text.

Jesus Loves His Friends (vv.1-6).

The story begins with Jesus learning that His friend Lazarus was ill (vv.1-3). A very important statement in the first verse identifies the family involved as Jesus’ friends. *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha (v.1)*. At first we are not impressed with the introduction to this *certain man*. But Lazarus was not just any man. Reading the rest of this story and the other mentions of this family in the Gospel accounts causes us to realize this man was a dear friend of Jesus.

This certain man named Lazarus lived in Bethany. But again this is not just any Bethany. For some reason there were multiple villages, towns, or locations called by the same name in Jesus’ day. For example, there was a place called Bethany on the other side of the Jordan where John had preached (John 1:28). That was the same location where Jesus began His public ministry and it seems likely that it was at least near the place where Jesus was when He received word of Lazarus’ illness (10:40-42).

Lazarus lived in the other village of Bethany also revealed here as the residence of him and his sisters Mary and Martha. This town is mentioned frequently in the context of the last days of Jesus’ work before He was crucified. It lay on the eastern side of the Mt. of Olives about two miles from Jerusalem, along the road to Jericho.

John referenced an event that occurred a few weeks later that helps us observe how deep this loving friendship between Jesus and Lazarus and his sister was. *It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was*

ill (v.2). John mentioned this event in order to identify which Mary is Lazarus' sister. There were at least four different women named Mary in Jesus' ministry. If that is not confusing enough, there was another Mary who also anointed Jesus (Luke 7:38). She was a sinful woman – Lazarus' sister was not. That situation took place at the home of a man named Simon who was an unrighteous Pharisee and happened early on in Jesus' ministry. This friend named Mary will anoint Jesus with oil at the beginning of the Passion Week just before Jesus was crucified (John 12:1-8). It was in the home of a healed leper named Simon who also lived in Bethany. At the moment of the anointing, Jesus taught that she did this as a memorial to His coming death.

That leaves us with a sticky question. If Lazarus was Jesus' friend, why was He sick? Sometimes we think that Christians (friends of Jesus) should be miraculously spared from the effects of sin in this world. In reality, bad things do happen to good people in the will of God. Jesus Himself was perfectly righteous and yet God the Father allowed sinners to kill Him. We, the friends of Jesus, will suffer the effects of sin much like everyone else does with two significant differences. First, while we suffer God sustains us with His immeasurable grace. Second, our suffering ultimately works out to God's glory as we will live with Him forever once the suffering is over.

These people, this family who were friends of Jesus, trusted Him. *So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (v.3)*. They sent word to Jesus who was staying with His disciples somewhere on the other side of Jordan. The place was probably at least twenty miles east/southeast which would make it a two day journey. Sending word to Jesus is a lot like praying. This was like Job who sincerely prayed to God during his suffering. It is like King Hezekiah who prayed to God when he was taken by what appeared to be a fatal illness. It was like us who pray to God. Every petition we pray in Jesus' name is a request sent to God through Jesus.

Notice that there is a good illustration of the principles of prayer in this part of the story. The family sent word to Jesus but didn't tell Him to come immediately. Obviously, they trusted that He would do what is best. Second, they sent word to inform Jesus, but they didn't try to tell Him what to do. Again they trusted that He would do what

is best. Third, they sent word with no demands attached because they had faith that Jesus would do the right thing.

It is true that Jesus taught us to ask our heart's desire when we pray (Mt. 7:7) and illustrated persistent asking with the story of the widow and the unrighteous judge (Luke 18:2). He also taught that whatever we ask we will receive if we have faith (Mat. 21:22). However, it is very easy to allow human greed or impatience or zeal to get in the way as we pray. While we are free to ask God according to the desires of our hearts, we must always be sure that our desires line up with His will. This story of Lazarus is a good example of how human will would have shortchanged God's glory.

Jesus loves His friends, and Jesus loves God's glory (vv.4-6). Can those things work together? Jesus promised that this situation would work out for God's glory. *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" (v.4)*. Someone might wonder why Jesus said that Lazarus' illness would not lead to death and then he died. Jesus meant that Lazarus' death would not be final because He knew that He was going to raise Him from the dead. That sounds good in theory, but how would you feel if you were Martha or Mary? These were real people who figured in God's remarkable plan to bring glory to Himself. When God works circumstances for His own glory, things can get exciting for normal people.

Notice the connection between the glory of God and that the Son of God may be glorified through it. This is the point Jesus has been making in His arguments with the Jews. God the Father sent God the Son to this earth to testify of Him. The miracles He did demonstrated God's power but also exalted Him as the Son of God. Here was a human tragedy that involved the death of a beloved brother. As it is with most humans, Mary and Martha would only be able to see the human dimension. But Jesus was trying to teach the disciples that God in His infinite wisdom does unusual things for His glory. To bring about that glory often requires humans experiencing odd and painful situations.

Talk about odd, in verse five we discover that Jesus loved the friends so much that He stayed in the wilderness. To human ears that might not even sound like love. But Jesus loves. He loves people by name. *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus (v.5)*. We

really don't know much about Lazarus' personality because the Bible does not reveal very much about him. He seems like a quiet, faithful friend of Jesus. He was clearly a devoted brother who took care of his two sisters. Every indication is that they all lived together – he having no wife, and they having no husbands.

Mary's personality on the other hand is described quite well in the Bible accounts. We find it easy to understand why Jesus loved her. When Jesus taught, Mary was right there hanging on every word. She didn't just talk about trusting Jesus but lived out her faith in Him.

Then there was Martha. No doubt many of us might conclude that it would be a little more difficult to love her. She appears to be one of those folks who just has to be in control of the situation. While she might appear to be the perfect hostess, the reality was that she had her priorities mixed up. Here is the story from an earlier visit by Jesus.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

It is easy for us to love people whose personalities mesh with our own. But Jesus loves people – regardless of our idiosyncrasies. Jesus in all His human emotion loved these people and clearly enjoyed being with them. His love is rooted in perfect knowledge. Since Jesus loved this family, He would no doubt race to Bethany as quickly as possible in order to at least comfort them in the illness of Lazarus. Surely in His humanity He wanted to. But Jesus loved with perfect divine love. Divine love (God-kind of love) always desires the very best for the object of the love.

The very best thing for any of us is to be used for God's glory.

*So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was (v.6). Jesus did what He knew was best for everyone – God and friends. How hard was it for Jesus in His humanity to stay put while His friend died? This is what the writer to the Hebrew Christians meant when He wrote, *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).**

Our son, Michael, was hospitalized again this past week in his battle with Crohn's Disease. The first question I find myself asking at such times of suffering is, "God, why are you allowing this?" Thankfully, we have learned to let that question go away as we focus on the more important question, "God, how will You bring glory to Yourself through these circumstances." In ways we often do not understand because of our human limitations, God allows trials like Paul's thorn in the flesh so that He can be glorified. Paul too wondered, like we do, like Mary and Martha no doubt wondered, "Why Lord?" God's answer to him is instructive: *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9a).* Our conclusion in times like these should be: *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9b).*

Jesus Teaches Lessons to His Friends (vv.7-16).

One of the lessons Jesus' friends needed to learn was that if they walk in the light, they will be okay (vv.7-10). Though it would be hard for the disciples to understand, it was right for them to go to Judea at that time. At exactly the right time, Jesus informed the disciples that they needed to go to Judea (specifically Bethany). *Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again" (v.7).*

We do not know how long they had been in the wilderness near the Jordan River. They had left Jerusalem (and therefore Judea) shortly after the Feast of Dedication which would have ended on Chislev 30 (December 15?). The Lazarus story took place within a

few weeks of Passover – so sometime in the early Spring. Now was the time for Jesus and the disciples to be near Jerusalem.

The friends didn't understand how this could be right. *The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (v.8)*. The angst of the leaders had risen especially since Jesus had emphasized during the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication the fact that He and God are equal, and the religious authorities were greatly opposed to Him. The religious rulers had already decided that execution was fitting for the man from Nazareth who claimed equality with God. It was just a few weeks earlier that the Jews had picked up stones to kill Him. Humanly speaking it would not make any sense at all for them to go the village that lay two miles from Jerusalem on the eastern side of the Mt. of Olives. Often when we are confused, when we don't understand what God is doing, is the very time when God desires to teach us a lesson about Himself.

Jesus was using this time to teach the lesson about walking in the light. He assured the disciples that they needed to walk in the light so they wouldn't stumble. *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" (v.9)*. In general terms, the ancient middle eastern people divided a 24 hour period into 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness. Depending on the season, this was not always exact. Jesus gave a general principle that people had about half a day in which they could walk in the light. In the light, we are able to see obstacles that would cause us to trip and avoid them.

But the lesson really was not about how to keep from stubbing your toe. Jesus was making a spiritual application. He tried to help His friends understand that it was safe for Him to go to Jerusalem because, according to the Father's plan, it would be a few weeks yet before the authorities would crucify the Son. In God's plan, it was still daylight. For the disciples, the lesson was that as long as they were walking in fellowship with Jesus, they were in the light. If they were in the light, they didn't need to worry about stumbling if they stayed near Him.

Conversely, the other side of the issue meant that if we walk in the darkness, we cannot keep from stumbling. *But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him (v.10)*. The

time was fast approaching when Jesus, the Light of the World, would return to God the Father. At that time, evil men would have their way with Jesus' followers. The danger of stumbling was experienced by the disciples in that ten of them would be executed for preaching about Jesus and John would be banished to the deserted isle of Patmos until he died an old man.

Try to imagine a world completely devoid of God's light. In that setting, everyone stumbles all the time. No one can do what is right and pleasing to God without His light of truth illuminating the way. While we complain about the explosion of sin, violence, disrespect for authority and lawlessness in our culture, we cannot imagine how awful it will be when the Light goes out. I do not care to live in a world without God's light.

Okay, that was a nice lesson, but it didn't really clear things up for the disciples. Jesus' friends are confused sometimes (vv.11-16). What was Lazarus' condition, really? Jesus told the disciples that His friend had fallen asleep. *After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him" (v.11)*. Notice that *our friend* has fallen asleep. The friend of Jesus is the friend of Jesus' followers. Therefore, all of them should have been concerned for him, as it appears they were.

But Jesus explained that Lazarus had fallen asleep. In this statement, Jesus used a common word for sleep. But the grammatical form is unusual because Jesus said that sleep had overtaken Lazarus. We know that Jesus meant that death had overtaken His friend. However, while using sleep as a picture of death is common in the New Testament, it was not so used in the Old Testament. It is not likely that the disciples would have grasped this figurative language.

"Our friend has been overtaken by sleep but I will go awaken him." The disciples, though friends of Lazarus, could not do what needed to be done. Jesus said that He had to do what needed doing. Should this not have alerted them to a special need? Okay, no problem. He will wake up. *The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover" (v.12)*. The disciples were as human as we are and could not grasp the special work of glory that God was doing. So often we respond to God's work with typical human conclusions. If the guy is asleep, wake him up.

But it is obvious that the disciples were not listening. The trip is at least two days long. Wouldn't a sleeping man awaken naturally by then? There is trouble brewing in Jerusalem with the authorities. Why did they wait two days and then decide to go wake up the sleeping man? And what about this walking in light versus walking in darkness principle? We often miss so much of what God is trying to teach us.

We are often confused like the disciples obviously were. *Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep (v.13)*. Suddenly Jesus' words seemed very confusing. Was He really glad that He was not present to heal Lazarus? *Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died" (v.14)*. Okay, now they knew the truth. Their friend had died. Would they not quickly do calculations and realize that if Lazarus had been so sick, why didn't they start out for Bethany two days ago? And didn't Jesus say that this illness would not result in death?

But here is the real kicker. Jesus said, *"And for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him" (v.15)*. Are you kidding? How could Jesus say He was glad? How calloused was that? No! Listen to the entire statement. This whole scenario is for the disciples' sake. It was the ultimate teaching moment. The divine purpose in all of it was increasing the disciples' faith. We are so prone to respond foolishly instead of with God-given wisdom when our boats are upset on life's sea. We forget Solomon's warning: *"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13)*. When your car's tire goes flat ask first, "What can God teach me through this?" The same is true when you lose your job, when someone changes your plan, when you are taken ill. Always, always God is desiring to expand the faith of His people.

Indeed the disciples appeared to be confused. But Thomas proved that they were confused but dedicated. *So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (v.16)*. Now here was a guy with spiritual myopia! All Thomas could see in the whole picture was that they were going to accompany Jesus back to Jerusalem where the authorities would kill them all. Doesn't he sound like Rex the dinosaur from *Toy Story* who can only see the worst side of things? Regretting another wrong decision he moans, "Great! Now I have guilt." Yes, but at least

Thomas was willing to go. In fact, tradition claims that Thomas was speared to death while preaching the gospel near Madras in India around A.D. 52.

The attitude for all who will learn the divine lessons is complete trust regardless of the circumstances. When we are confused, it is right for us to ask our Lord, "Show me, teach me, help me." We are always striving to the point in faith in which we can honestly say with suffering Job, *"Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15a)*.