

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF
Jesus, Our Friend
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I invite you to turn to the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John. There are five Sundays through Easter. I really have felt directed to preach a series of five sermons entitled “Our Friend, the Lord.”

Today we’ll look at the theme from John, “Our Friend in Grief.” Next Sunday, Our Friend of Sinners, the story of Zacchaeus. Then Our Friend who Loves, that is the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany. Then on Palm Sunday, Our Friend who Serves, Jesus took a towel and washed the feet of the disciples. Then on the last Sunday, Easter Sunday, Our Friend Forever.

So I invite you to be with us this whole month as we look at these glimpses into the life of our Lord and the final days of his earthly ministry.

John 11 records the seven signs that Jesus did as noted in the gospel of John – the raising from the dead of Lazarus. I’ll read the first 6 verses but if you’ll keep your Bible open we’ll have reference to it as we progress.

“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 is not unto death. It is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.’ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”

Aren’t verses 5-6 unusual? He loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus so he stayed where he was two whole days. The Lord is capable of doing strange things in order that a fuller glory and presence might be revealed. In this text today I want us to see three ministries of our friend the Lord in the midst of grief.

One ministry, which he has, and a ministry which we may not often see but which is here in the text, is the ministry of delay. He chooses not to come. He chooses not to come not because he is indifferent to Mary and Martha. When he delays with us it is not because he is indifferent to our need. How can anyone say that the Lord was indifferent when we have here in the text such beautiful indication of the fact that the Lord loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus? If you love a person it means you’ve spent some time with them in order to really get the perspective of what it means to be involved with them as people. And the Lord had evidently spent good amounts of time with this family. Three persons in the family as far as we know.

In fact his attitude towards them is so deep that when later he stands with Mary coming to the place where Lazarus is laid, he weeps. It’s such a significant statement that after the years of Jesus’ ministry on earth he never became callous to human beings or to their needs. That even though he faced sickness time and again and death time and again, it never ceased to move him. The reason why he delays is not because he is indifferent to the needs of Mary and Martha and perhaps Lazarus.

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

The reason why he delays secondly is not only because he's not indifferent but also he does not delay because he's too busy to go.

We see how the Lord in the gospels is one time on his way to the house of the synagogue ruler by the name of Jairus. On the way a woman wants to get through to Jesus and touch him. Jesus was not too busy to allow her to touch him.

When need was so evident that the Lord's presence was required the Lord was never too busy. So even though other ministries would have upon him it is not because he is too busy that he refrains from going.

It also might be said that he chooses to delay not because he is afraid.

One of the disciples is afraid for Jesus to go to Bethany. It was right next door to Jerusalem. Thomas in hearing that Jesus intended to go to Bethany, when Jesus does make up his mind to go, it is Thomas who says in verse 16 "Let us also go that we may die with him." Thomas is always the optimist in the group. He sees the best resulting from a course of action. But Thomas realizes what the stakes are. That if Jesus even ventures close to Jerusalem there are those who are out for his life. Interestingly enough when we come to the end of the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John we find that one of the results of Jesus going to Bethany and raising Lazarus is that it incites and mobilizes the opposition, the religious leadership to take action against him.

But the reason why Jesus delays is not because he is afraid for ultimately he goes anyway. We see him face the cross stalwartly without fear.

Another reason might be suggested that he delays not because he's powerless.

It wasn't because the Lord needed to fuel up his spiritual strength to be able to face the situation of Lazarus lying in a tomb. He has power. He says all power is committed to him.

We sometimes lose something in the reading of the story. We read terms like "four days." Because it's so quick to say we think it's so quick to do. But can you imagine the situation if in your home the person who was closest to you had died and you sent for the Lord – he was physically on earth and you sent for the Lord just before that person died with a message: "Lord, he whom you love is ill." And right after the messenger had gone the person who was ill, who was close to you died. And there was no chance to get the messenger who was already on his way. And grief had overtaken and there was no calling the messenger back. Then four days later the Lord shows up on the scene. For four days you've had to go through the process of grief, of weeping, of going to bed at night with an empty heart, with an empty bed in the house. Here the Lord shows up late four days later.

What shall we make of this? Why does the Lord delay? If the ministry of the Lord on this occasion to Mary and Martha is a ministry of delay what is he up to?

Several things suggest themselves to us by way of his ministry.

One thing certain is that we can never judge God's love by circumstances. But we must always judge the circumstances by God's love.

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

What am I saying? I'm saying if you look around and see what's happening and you look at the circumstance and you say, now that this good thing has happened to me it must mean God loves me. But now that this bad thing is happening to me it must mean God doesn't love me. You cannot judge the love of God by circumstances.

On the other hand we are meant to judge the circumstances by his love. So that if he delays it's because he loves us, not because he is busy, not because he is indifferent, not because he's unconcerned, not because he is powerless, not because he is afraid. But if he delays as seen in the story he loves us. Besides our delays when we go through them seem so long. When the Lord meets and ministers the long time of delay is over the moment the Lord shows up on the scene and it seems that what has been days of slow motion, dream like action is transformed in a minute of time to something entirely different.

A preacher of another generation, Alexander McClaren says this beautiful thing about this passage, "Do not forget that heaven's clock is different from ours. In our days there are twelve hours. In God's day, one thousand years. What seems long to us is to him a little while. For two days, eight and forty hours, he delayed his answer to Mary and Martha and they thought it was eternity. While the heavy hours crept by and they only said, 'It's very weary. He comes not.' How long did it look to them when they got Lazarus back?"

How long will it seem to us whatever trials we go through when in that completed moment we stand before the Lord and it will seem as but a moment.

There's a beautiful psalm – Psalm 35. "Weeping may tarry for the night but joy comes with the morning." Paul says, "We bear these momentary afflictions now because of the eternal weight of glory that waits for us."

Why does the Lord delay? In the text it's very clear. He loved them so he delayed. Strange. The Lord does not always judge things the way we would. We would jump in and get things going. By the way, it's striking to see the confidence of Mary and Martha in the Lord by means of looking at the request that they sent to the Lord. They said, "He whom you love is ill." That's all they said. They didn't say, "Lord, come here right away. Get here as fast as you can get here." But simply, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." There was a confidence they had in the Lord. He knows. He's able to judge the illness. He's able to judge our needs. So we give him the freedom to come or to stay where he is.

He ministers in delay and when he delays it is because he loves. How unique that is compared to what we're often fed. We are often assuming that because he delays it is because it is the result of our little faith. That may be from time to time the case. But Mary and Martha could have all the faith in the world yet the Lord chose to delay. To delay because he loved.

Incredible concept.

That's one ministry of the Lord in this text. He chooses to delay.

The second ministry which he has is he comes. Thank the Lord he does come! To Mary and Martha he comes.

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

It's a good thing that they had stayed there. I suppose that in their grief they could have taken one of two courses. They could have tried to flee the scene or they could have become very panicky and sought to put pressure on Jesus, sought to have abused their friendship, their *in* to him to get him to come earlier.

But when he comes what is on their mind really explodes. In fact the first words which Martha speaks to the Lord when he meets her is "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." That is just the skim. All four days they had been saying that. Time after time as they faced the moment of the death of their brother, as they faced his preparation for burial, as they buried him, as they rolled the stone over the sepulcher, as they went home to their grief. How many times did they speak in those hours those words? If he had been here this would not have happened.

It's a natural instinct that when he comes, Martha should say, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." And the first time Mary sees him the first words out of her mouth are the same as her sisters: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." There's almost a gentle rebuke. A gentle one. A testing of faith.

When the Lord comes what does he find here? What is his ministry?

One thing he finds is that these two people behave pretty much the same way in grief as they do in everyday life. The extreme moments of life only show our character in more extreme dimensions. But basically we're the same person. In the every day life or in the moment of crises.

Look, for example, at Martha. What kind of an individual was she? We know from the gospels as one who serves. She didn't like to sit. She didn't like to meditate or contemplate. So when she hears that Jesus is coming what does Martha do? She gets up. And she goes to the village to meet with him as he comes the outskirts of the town.

But what does Mary do? The news of Jesus if it got to her didn't arouse her. Maybe she didn't want to hear that he was coming. She sits in her room and she breaks down and she continues her mourning because she's the kind of person that has a lot within her that is not expressed in physical dimensions.

And the Lord ministers to them differently. With Martha he can get in a conversation. She's ready to talk. So he explains to her. He talks with her. Do you think Jesus could have talked with Mary? The only thing that Jesus could do with Mary is come to her and she is overcome with grief so much that I see Jesus gathering Mary to himself and hugging her. And Jesus couldn't say a word to Mary. The only thing he could do is weep. His ministry to Mary is one of weeping. His ministry to Martha is one of talking. Jesus sensed that within their personalities here were different needs so he met those needs.

It's incredible to watch Jesus in the gospels. How he is so tuned in to the specific needs which we have. Here are times in grief when the Lord because of our own makeup can talk with us. By virtue of the conversation he has with us through his word and through the counsel of

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

Christian friends and prayer can bring us out of it. And at other times just that moment in his presence or the presence of another believer makes all the difference in the world.

This knowledge by the way that has come to me in the gospels that recognizes that I am going to behave in crises pretty much the way I am every day. That crises are only going to be an extension of what I am now. That if I tend to become slightly unglued at things now I will come a lot more unglued in crises. That's made me very aware that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit by giving us the word and the counsel of the word is to help us order our lives on a daily plane that in the struggles and in the more strenuous times we might have a response that's firm and right.

The Lord comes and he finds us acting consistently with our personality.

He also comes and one of his ministries when he comes is he asks us to believe even in the midst of grief. An incredible conversation happens here with this woman Martha. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, verse 20, she went and met him while Mary sat in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died and even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Death had not disturbed her faith in the Lord. The Lord responds to her, "You bother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Tremendous impact of the story is that Martha did not need a miracle to prove her faith. The faith was already there. She believed. She believed that the Lord had power to do whatever he would ask. And she believed that her brother would rise again on the last day. Death – the stark figure of it in her own family – had not at all disturbed her faith in the resurrection. If anything it had made it stronger.

But the Lord has another ministry of bringing belief to us in the midst of grief when he comes. He seeks with Martha to transfer her faith from an idea to his own persons. When she said, "I know he'll rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" You see what he's trying to do with her? He's saying "Martha it's one of your credal definitions. It's in your dogmatics. Your doctrinal statement. I believe in the resurrection of the dead. Martha, that's a very great thing that you believe that but now I want you to see something. I want you to move that belief from out there on the intellectual level right to me because I am the resurrection. I am life myself. Martha, it's more important that you believe in me than you believe in the doctrine for I am the doctrine. Believe in me. Look to me. I am the resurrection and he life."

Remember Martha is still grieving. Remember she could have a lot to blame the Lord for having delayed his coming for so long. But Martha shoots right back to him, "Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God. He who comes into the world." There is an incredible statement of faith that rises within her heart as she looks to Jesus in this moment in her life.

When he comes he has found Martha believing and he has needed in his coming to transfer her faith from an idea to himself. But when he comes he also has another ministry.

He acts.

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

What the Lord does upon coming to Mary and then finally to the tomb is he calls Lazarus forth. The text of the gospel when we began looking at it in John 11 indicated that the reason for the illness was it was for the glory of God. Again, later on in verse 14 the disciples are told that the miracle is for their sake. I wonder what it means that Jesus should say this is for the glory of God. That's a strange reason for doing a miracle of a resurrection from death.

Who needs this miracle? Does Lazarus need the miracle? Does Lazarus need to be raised from the dead? I came to the conviction Lazarus didn't need the miracle. He was dead but as we know from our faith in the Lord as Paul will later tell us "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Lazarus had died as a friend of Jesus and he's with the Lord. He's in the presence of God. His spirit is in heaven. I can't define that. I don't understand the relationship between space and time and how God's going to take care of all this. But that's where the scripture says the righteous are in the eyes of the Lord. Psalms says "Precious in the eyes of the Lord are the death of his saints." Did Lazarus need the miracle? No. Did Mary and Martha need the miracle? From a human grief standpoint, yes. But from another standpoint, no. They didn't need the miracle. Their faith was solid. They believed in the resurrection and the grief while it was heavy to bear had not sapped the energy and vitality of their faith in the living God. The miracle was not for them. What was for the miracle for? It was for the glory of God! But what is the glory of God and what's that got to do with us? Everything!

We have a rough time sometimes with theological words and trying to figure out what they mean. What does it mean "This is for the glory of God"? Glory defines that which is the sterling quality, the essence of something. That which is unique and outstanding.

The glory of America is her freedom. The glory of a runner is his swiftness. The glory of a scholar is his wisdom. The glory of the Lord on this occasion is his power over death. That is what makes him unique and outstanding and unequaled in all the human race. At this moment he calls Lazarus forth. Why? Not because Lazarus needs it. Not because Mary and Martha need it. But because we on earth, the whole world from then until now needs to get a picture of what it is to serve a God who comes in human form who does more than teach us moral precepts by which to live. But who gives us hope, who gives us resurrection, who gives us life. Who says, "Come follow me. I've got a life ahead of you that is something else!" I've got eternal life that is demonstrated to show you my glory. Here it is: Lazarus come forth!"

But couldn't the Lord have demonstrated this at his own resurrection? Of course. Yes he did. But he wants us to know that not only does he have power over his own life. He has power over others. If we were left simply of the story of his own resurrection we would of course had a knowledge that he is risen but we see it in the gospel that also he raised those who were dead.

Jesus says in John 5, by way of prophecy, which already is fulfilled in John 11. He says "The day and the hour is coming when the dead what hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear shall live."

All of us who have put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are going to walk through the same thing one day. Either by rapture of those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Or the calling forth of those who are dead. There is going to be one day a pronouncement of our name.

OUR FRIEND IN GRIEF

Jesus, Our Friend

It seems almost initially that this miracle is something selfish from Jesus' point of view. He's done it for *his* glory. The glory is for us.

But I want to take that one step further. In John 17 we find Jesus praying to the Father. It's his great high priestly prayer. He prays the night on which he is betrayed. He's prayed as the disciples are gathered together in the upper room. There is an incredible phrase in there: "Father, glorify thou me with the glory, which I had before the world was made." What? What the Lord is saying is he doesn't expect any greater glory to be given him in the realms of eternity because he has come to earth. He himself doesn't get anything out of having laid his life down for us. It's "glorify thou me with the glory which I had." It's not *give me more*. It's *which I had*.

What does the Lord get out of coming to earth? For himself, selfishly speaking, nothing. But what he gets is a family of sons and daughters of God. We are what is the result of his efforts. Nothing for himself but everything for us.

When we talk about Jesus as our friend we must understand him when we look at him first and foremost that he is our friend who has power and authority. We serve him not simply because he brings us good advice which he does. Not because he brings us good morals which he does. But because he brings to us release from sin, because he brings to us eternal life and because he brings to us fellowship with God.

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