

***“With Jesus: At Bethany”***

There are a couple of similarities between today’s Gospel narrative and the one we spent time with last Sunday. Last week, in the sighting of the man born blind, Jesus taught the disciples (and us) that the man’s blindness was not the fault of anyone’s sin, but ***“that God’s works might be revealed in him.”*** In similar manner, Jesus informs the disciples today that the illness of His (and I suppose also their) friend Lazarus was ***“for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”***

There are two conclusions to draw from those statements. One could argue that Jesus’ view of God is that God brings pain, misery, distress, and grief into our lives just so that He can come as the hero to make it all better again (a view of God many do hold). One could argue that Jesus’ view of God is that, in the midst of life’s disappointments, hurts, tragedies, and disasters, God is at work. St. Paul would argue the second view is the one that we must embrace: ***“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*** [Romans 8:28 (NIV)]

Beyond that, both these narratives describe how Jesus used an event as a teachable moment. In the sighting of the blind man, He taught His disciples to alter their limited view that God is in the punishing business, while He taught the blind man true insight into what faith in Him involves, and taught the Pharisees that spiritual blindness is the usual condition of those who are very sure they have no blindness at all. In this event with Lazarus, Jesus is teaching that death is now regarded as sleep (it’s permanence is already eroding, first with Lazarus and finally with His own resurrection); that He is resurrection and life (not just a sign of it, but the embodiment of it); that His own compassion is pronounced and deep (***“Jesus began to weep,”*** implies an action that was somewhat prolonged, as we note from the reaction of the crowd, ***“See how he loved him!”***) and that such grief even in the knowledge of resurrection hope is part of what it means to be human; and, as many commentators have

noted, Jesus does not leave Lazarus to his own devices after his resurrection, but immediately involves the circle of friends around him to care for him, ***“Unbind him, and let him go.”***

There is a lot involved in this narrative.

The first is: Why did Jesus delay His response to the request to come to Lazarus side while Lazarus was still ill? Both sisters have the same reaction, even to the same words: ***“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*** Much depends on how you read that: It could be an expression of wistful longing: *“If only things had worked out so you could have arrived in time, what a wonderful serendipity that would have been.”* Or, it could be an expression of deeply-felt anger: *“Where were you? We sent word four days ago. Why didn’t you come?”* I tend to lean toward the latter, but recognize that I am in the minority on that. It just seems more human to me that those grieving would actually be grieving, which more often than not involves anger.

Martha holds out hope in spite of her anger: ***“But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”*** *“So maybe you didn’t show up in the nick of time, but I won’t hold that against you if you take care of things now.”* Once again, one of the very human responses to death is bargaining; trying to get the reality of death diverted or reversed.

The second issue is: Why did Jesus weep even though He knew that Lazarus’ resurrection was immanent? Did He not know that He and all those with Him would very, very soon see Lazarus walk out of that tomb? Of course He did. So why did He cry? Because that is what humans do in the face of the death of loved ones. We weep, not because we have no hope, but because death means separation, loss, and emptiness. Jesus was weeping because He is fully and completely human.

The disciples are in their common situation of lacking comprehension. Jesus tells them Lazarus is asleep and He was going to awaken him. They, understandably I would say, assume that is precisely what Jesus means: Lazarus is asleep. Their spirits are even lifted by that

announcement: ***“Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.”***

***“Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’”***

Now, was Jesus speaking euphemistically when He used “sleep” to describe Lazarus’ condition? Our culture tends to use many phrases to avoid saying “died”— passed away; gone home; bought the farm. One web site had more than 80 words and phrases our culture uses to avoid saying someone died. Has Jesus gone that route?

I think not. Beyond the disciples’ ability to comprehend at this moment, Jesus is affirming a new reality about life and death. As He will soon affirm to Martha, since He is Himself resurrection and life, death is transformed into sleep. It is no longer the gaping maw it appeared to be before His arrival; it has become a passageway from life to life. This is critical to their faith and ours. They could not understand this until they had witnessed the resurrected Christ and been endowed by the Holy Spirit. We can understand, since we have witnessed the resurrected Christ and been endowed by the Holy Spirit.

With all of that, one exchange between Jesus and Martha caught my attention. I had noticed this before, but this week it jumped out at me, so I thought I ought to give it due attention. Jesus says to Martha: ***“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”*** As I went back through John’s Gospel (and I went through it thoroughly), I could find no evidence that Jesus had said such a thing to Martha. Which got me to wondering why Jesus would say these words at this moment and why John would choose to include it in his Gospel. He had told the disciples, concerning Lazarus’ illness: ***“This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”*** But that was four days before and two days journey away, and Martha was not present to hear it. Besides, it’s not quite the same thing.

So . . . how do we get at this (or is this just something weird that Pastor Just would get focused on that has no application to anything we

experience)? As an aside (but you will see, I hope, that it comes together eventually), I received an e-mail some years ago from a Pastor in Minnesota: *“Having moved to Minneapolis from the Northwest, I have had a crisis of faith whether or not to continue rooting for the Mariners (see Theology of the Cross) or the Twins (more of the same). However, after three wins in a row (Theology of Glory) led by a new manager, Lloyd McClendon, (A Valpo Grad) and having the Twins lose two in a row (ouch) my Lutheran (Theology of the Cross) is giving way to rooting for the Mariners anyway, at least until they sink again to below 500.”* Cubs fans all replied to commiserate with this e-mail, to which another Pastor added: *“What did Jesus tell the Cubs? Wait for it . . . ‘Don't do anything until I get back!’”*

Now, to that Theology of the Cross / Theology of Glory business: What is he talking about? It has to do with Luther's insistence that we are conformed to Christ in His suffering, and it is there, and only there, that we come to understand why Jesus came among us. Those who focused solely on the miracles and wonders of Jesus, Luther labeled “theologians of glory” and vouched that they had no business bearing the name “theologian.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer would pick up that theme in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, by labeling anything that did not center on the cross as “cheap grace.”

St. Paul wrote to the Philippians: ***“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death . . .”*** [3:10]. In other words, we come to know the power of Jesus' resurrection only as we are joined to Him in his sufferings and death. From one of my favorite authors, Robert Farrar Capon, comes this summation, *“For most people the Gospel is something like this: We are stuck in a snowdrift in our car in the midst of raging blizzard. Jesus fights His way to the heavenly garage where he cranks up the divine tow truck, warms up the cabin, has a thermos of hot chicken soup on the seat next to him, drives through the blizzard, finds our car, plucks us out of the front seat up into the warmth of the divine tow truck's cabin, warms us further with hot chicken soup, and delivers us safely back to the heavenly*

*garage. That is not the Gospel. This is the Gospel: We are stuck in a snowdrift in our car in the midst of raging blizzard. Jesus walks through the storm, climbs into the front seat with us, and we both die together.”*

Many people hear that and wonder: “*How is that Good News?*” It has to do with Jesus’ statement to Martha (I told you I would bring it back together). Jesus will shed light on it in the next chapter of John when He says, “***I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.***” [12:32] We are inclined to think that the “lifted up” phrase has to do with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven. It does not; the “lifting up” here is the lifting of Jesus onto the cross at Golgotha. This heinous, bloodthirsty, gruesome, barbarous, degrading manner of execution is the centerpiece of Jesus’ attraction — it is the magnet that draws us to Him.

If it is not, we have not gotten the message. So, if you think you can celebrate Easter without going first through the agony of Good Friday, you embrace a Theology of Glory. If you want to think only about things positively, or be told that God wants nothing for you but prosperity, you embrace a Theology of Glory.

Listen to St. Paul again: “***When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified***” [1 Corinthians 2:1-2].

“*And now this relates to Martha how?*” you may well ask. Listen again to what Jesus says to her: “***Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?***” We want to invert that: “*if you see the glory of God you will believe.*” No, says Jesus. Faith does not come through what we see of glory and wonder. Our bias is to lean in that direction, but we discover that such wonders do not save us; they at best point to the power that does save us. No, faith comes when we get the message that, in His death Jesus has cancelled the power of sin in our lives. He willingly submitted to death to rob sin of its power over us. So we get to see the glory of God when we witness the suffering and death

of Jesus. The true glory of God is His unmitigated love for us.

Why does Jesus say this here and why does John include it? It is possible that Jesus had, in a private conversation with Mary, made such an assurance about her seeing the glory of God. If so, we have no way of knowing that and are left with the narrative as John presents it.

So, look at the context: Jesus weeps. His distress is obvious. The crowd even gets caught up in it. Some ask: ***“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*** This raises a whole slew of questions about why God intervenes in this case but chooses not to in another case, and I have no answer for that. But that question goes to the Theology of Glory: Why isn’t the power of God always on display? Jesus asks for the stone to be removed and Martha raises the objection that things could get messy (well, at least smelly). It is to that objection that Jesus speaks.

How does raising this objection merit this reply? Any time anybody thinks she knows better than God what needs to be done in a given situation is living out of a Theology of Glory. When we are willing to give ourselves into the hands of God, no matter the foreseeable consequences, and trust that in His hands we will be secure, then we are living out of the Theology of the Cross. ***“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”*** Martha, trust me. Don’t question me. Give yourself to me.

Now, you may be inclined to want to disagree with what I have said here based on the ending of this narrative. John writes: ***“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”*** You may want to say, *“Pastor, they saw and then believed. They saw something pretty glorious — a resurrection. I’ve never seen a resurrection.”* I could counter with the argument that, before they ever saw anything, they had trust in Jesus: they came with Mary, and they came with Mary to weep with her — that’s Theology of the Cross.

That God stepped into that moment and brought about something

glorious is beside the point (okay, it's not the central point). God does what God does, and He invites us to trust in that, even and especially when we cannot clearly see what God is doing. The disciples decided to go with Jesus to Bethany even though it was dangerous to do so (Theology of the Cross). Martha met Jesus and expressed her anger and her hope. (Theology of the Cross). Mary expressed that same anger and disappointment (Theology of the Cross). But in the end, Jesus did what the Father wanted done in that moment (Theology of the Cross). If you agree that this was the right thing for Him to have done, so what? If you argue He should not have raised Lazarus unless every other corpse in that burial cave came out as well, so what?

Lastly, these instructions to the bystanders: ***“Unbind him, and let him go”*** — for a four-day-dead corpse? Martha was right, ***“Yeah verily he stinketh.”*** [KJV] (Theology of the Cross). And you should also know that in the next several verses John relates how the Pharisees and leaders saw this resurrection as the last straw and a reason to get Jesus out of the way. Even this glorious event is tied up in the suffering and death of Jesus — and as you walk with Jesus this day pondering His cross, His suffering, His death, and His resurrection, thinking Theology of the Cross ask yourself, *“What happened next for Lazarus?”*

Amen.