

Reflection for 5th week of Lent, 2017

(John 11: 1 - 45)

What does it take to believe?

I have to tell you, for days I read this Gospel over and over and over - the long version and the short version - hoping to find some direction for this reflection. What caught my attention were quirky things; I saw in this story that:

1. *Things are not always as they seem.*
2. *Jesus contradicts what we would normally expect*
3. *Many people give Jesus a hard time, questioning his actions and words.*
4. *Jesus gets perturbed more than once.*

I will point some of those things out to you as we go along.

You all know the story: Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary from the village of Bethany, was very ill and his sisters sent word to Jesus to let him know because he was a close family friend. When Jesus heard about the sickness he said, *"This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* That's an important sentence, and we'll come back to it. But one of my "stream of consciousness" thoughts when I first read it was *"Who did Jesus say this to?"* Martha and Mary weren't there; they were at home in Bethany. Did he say it to the messenger? Or was he making a declaration to himself to ready himself for his mission?

Now, we often view things from our own perspective, so in the very next line is one of the unexpected things that made me look twice. That line reads: *"Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he ..."*

All right, I am going to stop there for a minute and tell you why this had me doing a double take: If I were Jesus and someone I dearly loved were seriously ill, I would want to jump on my camel or run the distance to be with that person as soon as I could ... but here is what the Gospel says *"Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he remained for 2 days in the place where he was."* And one of the things that struck me besides the fact that he

didn't leave right away was the use of the word "So" instead of the word "But" ... *"Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard ... he stayed where he was."* That makes it sound intentional. Why would he do that?

Remember that sentence I said was important? *"This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* This story is not so much about Lazarus; it is all about Jesus - and Jesus knew what he was doing. He knew he had to do the unexpected, the spectacular for them to believe. He was playing to a tough crowd of very real, very human people who would give him a hard time throughout this whole story, opposing him, blurting out things that came from their limited field of view, questioning his words, his actions, his purpose.

Some examples of this ... after 2 days Jesus said to the disciples, *"Let us go back to Judea."* Their very human reply was, *"Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?"*

They were speaking from their gut reactions; Jesus was acting out of love for friends and a purposeful plan.

A little later Martha meets Jesus on the road and says *"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."* Still later, when Mary came to where Jesus was, like an echo she said, *"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."* You can hear the anguish in their words ... but Jesus knew what he was doing.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he became perturbed and greatly troubled." For a while I could not wrap my head around the word "perturbed" in this instance because in my mind "perturbed" means "annoyed," and Jesus certainly could not have been annoyed at seeing Mary's very real emotions over the death of her brother. Instead, most likely, seeing Mary's emotional distress, Jesus became very concerned for her and shaken within himself, feeling his own very real emotions erupting to the surface.

When Jesus asked *"Where have you laid him?"* they said, *"Come and see."* And then the human Jesus also wept. Then some of the understanding, empathetic Jews said *"See how he loved him."* While others got snarky, saying in opposition *"Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"*

Jesus, at this point must have been feeling not only the deep sadness of seeing people grieving over the loss of their friend and brother; he also gets perturbed a second time, and in this instance I think the feeling maybe was annoyance - annoyance at the others who didn't trust enough to let him be the healer he was meant to be. Even Martha, who believed in the healing power of Jesus and longed to have her brother back, objected to opening the tomb because there would be a great stench after four days.

So, *"What does it take to believe?"* Earlier in the story when Jesus was with the disciples he said to them *"Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe."* A strange thing to say, but Jesus knew the disciples - his own followers - needed to see something out of the realm of the ordinary, not a mere healing, but the miraculous action of raising Lazarus from the dead for them to really believe.

"What does it take to believe?" Jesus told Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* *"Do you believe this?"* he asked her. She said she did, but then he had to remind her again when they were at the tomb.

"What does it take to believe?" From outside the tomb, Jesus called Lazarus to come out. The people gathered there saw a body emerge from the tomb wrapped from head to toe with burial cloths, then the unbelievers began to know and to believe in the power and promises of Jesus.

What about us? *"I am the resurrection and the life,"* Jesus says. *"anyone who believes in me, even if he dies, will live."* Is it easier for us to believe because from a young age we have heard the Bible stories, grown up with families who have believed before us, and have grown in believing nurtured by the example of the faith of others? All of us who have professed our faith and lived a life based on that belief can take comfort and hope in believing. There is only one person we know here among us who has died - not once, but twice - and was brought back to life ... and she doesn't remember anything about it ... so none of us can really know what happens when we die, but our belief is a consolation, a hope and an expectation of new life to come. Our faith tells us that if we believe, we will be saved.

Now, what happens then to someone like my father who was baptized, confirmed, lived a relatively good life, did caring things for people, but stopped believing? And what happens with non-Christians who don't believe in the promises of Jesus. Heaven and life after death surely cannot be only for Christians - because what kind of God would allow that?

I would like to believe that somewhere in my Dad's deepest being there were still some traces of belief, even if he didn't know or acknowledge it; I'm hoping that the good he did in his life, helping people, appreciating creation, loving children and animals scored him points with God. I would like to believe that his baptism indicated a lasting faith in God's eyes, even if my Dad said he no longer believed. I would also like to believe that all good people, Christians and non-Christians alike, have a place in the heavenly kingdom.

I had a conversation with a friend about this recently; she said God knows our hearts, knows the good we've done, never gives up on us. **God BELIEVES IN US**.

The people in Jesus' time needed to see someone raised from the dead to believe. We've all heard that faith is believing what we can't see. I think what we can't fully see now is the vast, all-embracing love that God has for us ... a love so much more abundant than we can ever imagine. His sacrifice for us is an unimaginably good sign of this.

So, what about you? What do you believe?

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