

August 30, 2015

Sermon for a Grieving Church

John 11:1-6, 38-44

Opening words: Webster defines grief as, keen mental suffering or distress over an affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret. There is no other way to say it, we are a grieving church. Over a short period of time, we have lost three of our own, Annabelle, Carol, Penny and Larry. Their passing has affected every corner of this congregation. It is for this reason I have walked away from the book of Acts today and decided to go in a new direction, the resurrection of Lazarus. At the very heart of this story are grieving sisters. I have called this message *Sermon for a Grieving Church*. I could have just as easily called this message *Sermon for a Grieving Pastor*.

We are instructed today from the Gospel of John. It was written by the disciple who Jesus loved, John. It was penned about 50 years after the Master's resurrection to a Greek thinking audience. The storyline is unique, different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. This event happened just prior to the events of Holy Week. Our scripture lesson for today is John 11:1-6, and 38-44.

John 11:1-7, 38-44 ¹Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Edith Rockefeller McCormick, the daughter of John D. Rockefeller, maintained a large household staff. She applied one rule to every servant without exception: They were not permitted to speak to her. The rule was broken only once, when word arrived at the family's country retreat that her young son had died of scarlet fever. The McCormicks were hosting a

dinner party, but following a discussion in the servants' quarters it was decided that Mrs. McCormick needed to know right away. When the tragic news was whispered to her, she merely nodded her head and the party continued without interruption. There was no sign of grief. Can I be honest with you? I have a hard time relating to that story because appearances don't mean that much to me. When death invades our personal space, we wrestle with the grief. When was the last time you wrestled with grief?

Grief is a complex topic. Not a single one of us deals with grief in the same way. Some people cry openly when it comes to the death of a loved one. Some people only cry in the privacy of their own home. Some never cry. They just carry a void around in their heart. Some internalize their grief and grow silent. It is my experience that the same person can grieve differently at different times. The reason is, every relationship we hold is different. You will grieve differently for your aging, sick parent then you would for a child who was killed in a traffic accident. You will grieve differently for your spouse than you do for an aunt who lives in Florida. You will grieve differently for the family pet then you do for a neighbor. Sometime we grieve for the relationship we lost; sometimes we grieve for the relationship we will never have. Sometimes we grieve while the person is still with us, during a long terminal illness. Grief is a complex topic. There is no right way to grieve; there is no wrong way to grieve. There is only your way. We are all different and all the relationships we hold are different.

At the very heart of the story of the raising of Lazarus is death. After all, how can you have a resurrection without a death? At first, we learn the basic facts. Two of Jesus' close friends, Mary and Martha, had a sick brother, Lazarus. His illness is serious. Without the miraculous he is going to die. So they call their good friend and miracle man, Jesus. Everyone expects Jesus to hurry to his death bed. Instead, according to verse 6, Jesus doesn't leave for two days. It sounds cruel but it is true. Jesus is waiting for him to die. He is setting the stage for one of his greatest miracles. Four days after Lazarus' death, Jesus arrives. Mary and Martha think Jesus is too late. They are grieving the loss of their brother. It is at this moment the scripture begins to speak to us.

This morning I want to talk about death and grieving. It is not a topic for the young. It is a topic for those of us who wear the scars of life. I want you to remember these words the next time death invades your personal space. I believe they will help you. So this morning I want to make three bold declarations. This is the first declaration: **death is part of life**. This is the second declaration: **people help in the short term**. This is the third declaration: **Jesus helps for eternity**. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Death is part of life

The first significant death in my life was my maternal grandfather, Walter Milligan. I was only eleven years old when he passed. He lived in Brooklyn, New York. It is funny the things you remember. I remember driving to New York with my sisters and father. My mother had flown ahead to be with her family. I remember the calling hours lasted two days, 2-4 and 7-9. I remember walking into that large old funeral home with my family. I remember looking at my grandfather in his casket. The reality of that moment didn't really hit me until then. He was

wearing a three-piece suit with a green tie. He had died suddenly of a heart attack, so his lifeless body looked natural. I remember looking at his face and his hands. I remember my grandmother crying. I remember being excited about being with my New York cousins. However, what I remember most was my mother. I was standing next to the casket alone when my mother came up to me and said, "Russell, someday we are all going to die." I had never thought about my death until that moment. She was right! Not a single one of us is going to get out of this world alive. Each one of us is terminal from birth. Who is the first person you remember dying in your life? Is there someone you still grieve for today?

This is declaration number one: death is a part of life. Look at the text with me. Mary and Martha's brother had died. Who are Mary and Martha? They were close friends of Jesus. They had entertained Jesus in their home. They believed in Jesus; they sacrificed for Jesus. The Master owed them one, but they were no different from anyone else. Death invaded their personal space and they experienced real grief. Is there anyone here who hasn't lost a loved one to death? Is there anyone here who hasn't experienced grief? You may not like it. You may try to ignore it, but it is true. Death is a part of life. And all of God's people said, "Amen!"

People help in the short run

Grief counselors tell us there are certain stages in the grief process. Maybe you remember passing through these stages? Maybe you are passing through one of these stages right now?

1. **The Numbness Stage:** You just can't believe it is true.
2. **The Expressed Emotion Stage:** You just can't stop crying.
3. **The Loneliness Stage:** There are certain things you must do alone.
4. **The Questioning Stage:** Why didn't they exercise more and smoke less?
5. **The Guilt Stage:** You should have made them exercise more and smoke less.
6. **The Reality Stage:** You reenter life and move forward with those memories.

Do those stages sound familiar? They say everyone passes through the stages, but not for the same length of time. Some sprint to the Reality Stage. Some linger at a certain stage for quite a while. There is no right way or wrong way to pass through those stages. There is only your way. However, it is my experience that other people help you pass from stage to stage. That is why having good friends is important, especially in this area. How many people do you know who live in the Mahoning Valley alone? Their family members are living far away because they need a job. Or, their family members left because they need the sun. Cell phones are nice, but they don't take the place of human contact. In many cases the only people you see on a regular basis are your friends. Your friends will help you get through the longest days of your life.

This is declaration number two: people help in the short run. Look at the text with me. Lazarus is sick. Mary and Martha need some help, so they reach out to Jesus. They didn't just want Jesus for the healing. They needed Jesus to support them during that long day. In verse eighteen we learn many came to comfort Mary and Martha. They comforted them until Jesus eliminated their grief. You can never have too many friends. Friends help us with our grief in the short run. And all of God's people said, "Amen!"

Jesus helps for eternity

When former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982, George Bush Sr. was Vice-President. He went to Moscow to represent the United States. Bush said later he was deeply moved by the silent protest of Brezhnev's widow, Victoria. According to Bush, she stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, she performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: she reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong! She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.

This is declaration number three: Jesus helps for eternity. Look at the text with me. The raising of Lazarus is not a single event; the raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of things that are about to come. On Easter we remember the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection changed the way we look at death. Death is not the end; death is a momentary separation. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. All you have to do is believe in him and you will go to heaven. Romans 10:9 says, *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Jesus offers help for eternity. If you are planning on going to heaven someday, say, **"Amen!"**

When I first met my wife she was serving a church near Akron. The senior member in that church was a man by the name of Bernard. He was nearly 100 years old. He was one of the fortunate ones. He lived in his own home, near his son. Kathryn took me over one day to meet him. He really was amazing! He mind was clear and his health was good. He had lived in the same house for decades. He invited me to look around his house, so I seized the opportunity. We looked at all the rooms on the first floor, so he took me to the second floor. The second floor had three bedrooms. One bedroom was for Bernard. One bedroom was for guests. The third bedroom was roped off. I stood at the door of that room and looked in. Bernard said, "Russ, this is the room my wife died in over thirty years ago. It is just the way it was on that day." In the closet were her clothes and on the dresser was their wedding picture. He pointed to an old calendar on the bed. It was opened to a certain month. One of the days in that month was circled with black magic marker. Bernard said, "That is the date she died. I wish I would have died with her. She was a great woman." Bernard has been gone for years, but I can still hear those words.

Is there anyone you miss today? There must be someone. Death is part of life. It is alright to grieve, but you have to keep living! Life is a wonderful gift. You are in the world for a reason. I hope you don't miss a single day. William Ross Wallace said, "Every man dies - not every man lives." Are you living, or are you just waiting to die? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**