

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
 “This Stinks”  
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 November 1, 2009

Our gospel reading this morning comes from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John...verses 32-45. It's a passage not found in any of the other gospels. It's the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus. The gospels tell us that the members of this family were some of Jesus' closest friends. In the verses immediately before our passage today we have Jesus being summoned back to this family's home. He's told that Lazarus has died. Yet he doesn't return immediately. Perhaps it's because the area was hostile to Jesus. Or perhaps it's because Jesus knows that death is not the end. Finally he comes. At first it's Martha who greets Jesus at the edge of the village. She believes that Jesus can raise her brother from the dead because he is “the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.” She goes back home and tells her sister that finally Jesus has arrived. This morning's passage picks up from there...Listen for God speaking...

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him,  
 she knelt at his feet and said to him,  
 “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping,  
 and the Jews who came with her also weeping,  
 he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

He said,  
 “Where have you laid him?”

They said to him,  
 “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus began to weep.  
 So the Jews said,  
 “See how he loved him!”

But some of them said,  
 “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man  
 have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb.  
 It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.  
 Jesus said,

“Take away the stone.”

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him,  
 “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

Jesus said to her,  
 “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone.

And Jesus looked upward and said,

“Father, I thank you for having heard me.  
I knew that you always hear me,  
but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here,  
so that they may believe that you sent me.”

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice,

“Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out,

his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth,  
and his face wrapped in a cloth.

Jesus said to them,

“Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore,

who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did,  
believed in him.

The Word of the Lord...Thanks be to God

This stinks. You’ve heard many of the preachers who have stood up here before say something similar. This stinks. What stinks you might be asking? It stinks having to decide on your sermon title on the Monday or Tuesday before you have finished writing your sermon. But rest assured that my sermon title this morning is not a protest to finishing my sermon early enough so as to make the sermon title fit. And it certainly does not have anything to do with the new kitten that we’ve brought into the Farmhouse...who really does stink! No, this stinks. Death stinks. Both quite literally and figuratively.

Friends, today is November 1<sup>st</sup> -- All Saints Day -- and in many protestant churches the central liturgical act is the naming of the saints who have died during the past year. Today we’ll lift up the names of those from this congregation who have died during this past year. Many of us are still grieving the loss of loved ones, whether it’s been 10 months or 10 days, and I’m quite certain that at some point in the grieving process the words “this stinks” have been uttered. I would bet on it.

It’s no different for Mary and Martha in our passage this morning. Their brother Lazarus has died. While they are certainly grieving the loss of their brother, they are extremely worried about their future. Lazarus is the only male in the household in a culture in which a woman without a man was profoundly vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. Lazarus was not only a beloved brother, but was also the closest thing to a pension plan that Mary and Martha had, and he was slipping away. And the one person who could “fix” this...Jesus...is not around. This stinks. And when they send word to him to tell him about Lazarus he takes his own sweet time. He doesn’t come to be with his beloved friend as he lies dying, and he doesn’t come to honor his friend by being present at his funeral. This stinks!

And these are some of Jesus’ closest friends. Mary and Martha are faithful disciples and yet they are not exempt from the pain of the loss of a loved one. They are helpless and hopeless. They and those gathered around them ask the question that many of us find ourselves asking at similar times...Couldn’t God have prevented this from happening? One biblical scholar points out that –

*“a nagging question added insult to [Mary and Martha’s] injury.*

*The sisters, their family, and their neighbors were so flummoxed by the question that John repeats it three times in his story...It’s a question that we all ask even today. Couldn’t God have prevented this tragedy in the first place?”*

Good point. Couldn’t Jesus have healed Lazarus of his sickness like he healed all those strangers? Come on now...this was one of his best friends. Why not heal him?

Both Mary and Martha tell Jesus, once he finally arrives, that had he been there Lazarus would still be alive. And amidst all the grief and tears, the neighbors mumbled their own aside:

*“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (John 11:37).*

They are wondering, like the rest of us...why Jesus did not prevent all this horrible pain and heartache?

But the scriptures tell us that Jesus is also experiencing the same horrible pain and heartache. Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. And after asking where they had laid Lazarus and being taken to the place the gospel tells us that Jesus began to weep. And then he acts telling those gathered to take away the stone that was lying against the cave.

What’s funny here is that Martha...who in the verses before the ones we just read had proclaimed that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world” Martha who seems to believe that Jesus can indeed raise her brother from the dead...what’s funny is that now Martha seems more concerned about the stench than the fact that Jesus was about to do what she had summoned him for...make her brother come alive again. But her grief has her focusing on the reality of death...of the stench instead. Great thinking, Jesus...roll that stone away...this really does stinks!

Jesus seems a bit confused and annoyed when he responds to her stench comment when he says...

*“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”*

Martha is silenced and the crowd helps roll the stone away. Before he does anything else, Jesus pauses and thanks God. Then he commands Lazarus to come out...and come out he does. His hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. And scripture tells us that through this miracle many came to believe in Jesus.

And if the compilers of the lectionary had allowed us to read a few verses more, we would discover that for some of the Jerusalem crowd, restoring Lazarus to life was the final straw that convinced the religious elite that Jesus was too dangerous to continuing living.

I wonder how life was different for Lazarus after his death and resurrection event. It makes me think. Were his priorities the same afterwards as before? Did he work less and spend more time with family and friends? Can we imagine what his new life was like and then apply it to our own lives as resurrected people with belief in the resurrected Christ?

In honor of All Saints Day, I want to share the following reflection by Melody Beattie, an author and journalist, who I believe writes about how we could be living like Lazarus as a resurrected people...She writes...

*Speak your truth.*

*Listen when others speak theirs, too.*

*When you let go of fear, you will learn to love others,  
and you will let them love you.*

*Do not be afraid of dying.*

*But do not be afraid to live.*

*Ask yourself what that means.*

*Open your heart to love, for that is why you're here.  
And know that you are, and always have been One  
with Me and all who live.*

We are indeed one with all who live, all who have lived, and are yet to live. Today, on All Saints Day, you are invited to remember those who have come before us: those who have inspired us with their words and actions, who have worked for justice, and who have lived in faith and righteousness. Together, we can aspire to honor their lives and legacies in our own lives, in love and with hope.

I'm so glad that this year we get to celebrate All Saints Day and since it's the first Sunday of the month we'll be celebrating communion. It just makes sense. After the Invitation to the Table, in the Great Thanksgiving you'll hear the pastor pray for the "communion of saints" or "with the heavenly choirs and with all the faithful of every time and place" or "all the company of heaven". When I was a kid I never understood what the priest meant when he said those phrases. I've shared before that when asked to preach I always go to my favorite theologian, Frederick Buechner, to see his thoughts and insights on the passage and themes of the day. In his entry on the "communion of saints" he shares these thoughts...

*"And 'all the company of heaven' means everybody we ever loved and lost,  
including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them  
or didn't love at all.*

*It means people we never heard of.*

*It means everybody who ever did*

*-- or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will –*

*come together at something like this table*

*in search of something like what is offered at it.*

*Whatever other reason we have for coming to such a place,*

*If we come also to give each other our love*

*and to give God our love...[then] we are the communion of saints."<sup>1</sup>*

And let all God's children say...AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Beuchner, Frederick. Beyond Words (64-65).