

John 11:1-45 “Letting Things Die”

We've got another big passage from John this week, which we learned in Bible Study isn't unusual. Of the four gospels, John is way more about the “who and why” of Jesus rather than the “what and how,” so the stories tend to go into a lot more detail. I have to admit though, I have a hard time with this passage. Not because it's controversial or difficult either. No, I have a hard time with this because of an incident I had in church one time during a sermon on this passage. I've probably told you all about this before, but it bears repeating.

One of the things you need to know about me if you don't know already is that I came to faith in my teenage years so I wasn't familiar with church etiquette. I didn't know when to sit, when to stand, what to say or not say. It was like going to another country that spoke English, but had a completely different set of cultural standards. But I was in search of a church because my Campus Life leader said I needed to be in community with other Christians from different age groups. As I said a few weeks ago, my journey of faith has been ... complicated.

So the first time I ever heard a sermon about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead was at a Pentecostal Church I was attending. I'm not talking about a big, mega-Pentecostal church either. This was a small, no-frills congregation in a little building about the size of a two story 7-11. This was a church that had multiple services throughout the week too. Sunday morning worship was pretty standard and straightforward. Not much different than ours. You sing songs. Lift up prayers. Take offering. Read Scripture. Preaching. Invitation to come to faith. Commission folks to go do ministry. You know ... Sunday morning Church, like we do when we're in the building.

Then there was Sunday night and Wednesday night church. Now if there was ever a doubt about whether you were in a Pentecostal Church, Sunday nights and Wednesday nights were when those doubts were laid to rest! That's when people started raising their hands. That's when

people started dancing. That's when people started speaking in tongues! There was also a difference in the preaching too. Whereas Sunday mornings were typically a time where people were encouraged to walk the straight and narrow path of Jesus, avoid sin, and proclaim the good news, evening services were when the heat got turned up! That's when you learned about the flames of hell and how to avoid them. Here's the thing about hellfire and brimstone sermons that you need to know. Especially if you've never been to one or never been taught that these services were meant to be taken *very* seriously. There is no room for levity or humor in these services. The only two appropriate responses to sermons is either, "Thank God I'm saved" or "I am a wretched sinner in need of rescue." That's it.

But what happens if the preacher is unintentionally funny in their exuberance and you have a person in the congregation that gets the giggles easy? What do you do? Just asking for a friend. So this passage from John 11 was the text one Wednesday evening. And the preacher wanted to focus on verse 39 for some reason. In the version Mary read, which is the NRSV, verse 39 says, "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." But this church I attended believed that the Authorized King James Version of 1611 was the only valid translation of the Bible. Want to hear how the King James renders verse 39? It's priceless. 11:39, "Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

Now, most of you know how I get the giggles sometimes. It's hard to get control of them when they get started. But I actually did pretty good on that fateful evening when the guest preacher said, "stin-*keth*." I chuckled but managed to conceal it with a fake cough. But then he wouldn't leave it alone. The point the preacher was trying to make was that when Jesus raised Lazarus, he wanted to show everyone that he is the voice of life which awakens the dead ... the good odor which takes away the death odor. And for some reason the way he said "death odor"

tickled me. I wasn't able to conceal *that* chuckle, but I still managed to get it under control because my friend's mom shot me a death *glare*! I figured I'd better put a lid on this real quick! But the preacher would *not* let go of that phrase. All of a sudden he started talking about areas in *our* lives where *we* sin and a *death odor* is present. I think that's when I passed a note to my friend that said, "Like when we eat at Taco Bell?" And that made her laugh. And it all went downhill from there. Every time he said "death odor" I got to giggling which got my friend to giggling which got the whole row of youth sitting on the pew to giggling. Shortly thereafter, I moved on to try out my next church.

So you'll have to pardon me if I get a wicked little glimmer in my eye when I hear this passage read. I will assure you that I will *not* talk about death odors this morning. For *this* particular morning, in this particular place and time in history, there's something far more important that I believe we can take from this passage. What's notable for me in this story is how Jesus waited until Lazarus died before he answered Martha's call to come back to Bethany. This is something we touched on in Bible study a few weeks ago. I've always been taught to believe that Jesus never performed a miracle to show off. All of his miracles met human needs first and foremost, but often his miracles also communicated lessons about his purpose. The lesson in this story is that something new can be resurrected from something that died. And of course, we see that played out in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Lazarus' resurrection was almost like a sneak preview of this.

With that on the table, it's always good for us to ask, "Are there things in our lives that need to die so that something new and wonderful can be brought forward?" What are some of the harmful and destructive thoughts and practices in my life that take up my time and attention that need to die? What systems and beliefs do I cling to that prevent me from living an abundant life? Or to put it bluntly, what are some of the "not God" things in my life that I need to replace with "of God" things? Like I said last week – these are the questions we're supposed to be

asking during Lenten season anyway. So what about this *special* global-scale Lenten season we're having here in 2020?

What are some things that we can or should let die *now* in light of this Corona Virus pandemic? Well, maybe on a practical level, we can let the notion that we can't work from home die. We don't necessarily have to be out there clogging up our highways and public transportation systems to take up space in an office to do something we can do remotely. For one thing, we'd have cleaner air. For another, people wouldn't have to spend so much time commuting and would have more time to do things like gardening and spending quality time with family. This also opens up more opportunities for people with disabilities to work from home too. But that old paradigm that we can only do quality work in person just might need to die.

Okay, that's all good and practical, but what does this mean for the church? What does it mean for our mission and witness in the world? Well ... maybe we can let the idea that we can only "do" church one way die. Remember that the seven last words of the church will be, "We've never done it that we before." Well look at what we're doing right here right now? We've never done it this way before (aside from last week.) But we're adapting. We're changing. Jesus said the word of God and the Kingdom of God are like mustard seeds and yeast. They start out little-bitty, but soon they change the whole landscape or the whole loaf. Little changes add up. Maybe this "online church" isn't such a bad thing. We had 86 in worship last week between FaceBook Live and ZOOM. That doesn't even count people who watched FaceBook Live later or who visited our YouTube channel. There are so many ways we can get the Good News out there!

Okay, time to step on some toes. Maybe we can let the idea that people are poor or homeless *by choice* die. It's easy for those of us who have stable jobs and strong family networks to look down on others and say, "They choose to be this way, so they're undeserving of help." Let's face it ... there's going to be a lot of people who had stable jobs two

weeks ago who are going to be out of work and facing the very real possibility of homelessness. Maybe the new thing that can resurrect from this particular death is an extra measure of compassion and a greater commitment to be a part of the solution instead of just complaining about the problem.

Here's another one. Maybe we can let our "me first" attitude die. I read an article this past week about doctors who've been prescribing themselves and hoarding a compound of medicine used to treat rheumatoid arthritis that's mixed with another drug used to treat malaria. Why? Because it *may* be effective against the coronavirus! And because they're hoarding this, folks who actually *have* rheumatoid arthritis may be short-changed! And as much as I'd like to be mad at the doctors for this, they are only doing it because our culture's attitude of scarcity creates a system where we feel like we always have to grasp, hoard and compete so that we can be sure that someone else doesn't get what's "mine!" That's not who God created us to be. What needs to be in place instead is an attitude of abundance.

Now ... here's the thing - We can come up with all sorts of examples of things that should die this morning, but what I want you to do is reflect on this on your own time. Let's call it your "Lenten Season Homework" for the week. See, what we need to be careful about is talking about things that need to die just to get them out of our hair. We're not doing this so we can avoid feeling uncomfortable. Let's let them die simply because we have faith that something new will be resurrected from the ashes. Maybe then we'll be kinder, more compassionate, more giving, more gracious, more loving ... more like Jesus. And again, isn't that what Lent is all about in the first place?