

# **"Grieving in the Times of Corona"**

## **Sermon on Sunday, March 29, 2020**

Based on John 11

Some of the most difficult experiences people have had to deal with in these past weeks are funerals and planned weddings. To emphasize the point let me ask this simple question: how do you grieve without the comfort of human touch and the support of a caring community? Sure, there are substitutes. We call each other. We send each other cards. We post messages on the obituary page. We send caring emojis via Social Media, etc. But can anything really replace the comfort of arms wrapped around you? It is difficult. My brother's father-in-law died just as the crisis began to take hold in Germany and the family went through several planning adjustments to make even a small funeral happen, just before such gatherings were banned for good. I could hear the pain in the voice of my sister-in-law. Her father, Richard Wagner, was a baker in a small town, and over many years and decades he had provided cakes and baked goods to numerous people and supplied them for thousands of funerals. The after-funeral coffee is a huge tradition in rural Germany. Now his family could see no justice in this man being buried without much ceremony and the customary community gathering with coffee and cake and the comfort of human company and touch. It was touchy, to say the least.

Today's gospel reading sends us straight to a funeral gathering. This is another one of John's long stories, which frankly require an attention span that we can't take for granted these days. I will focus my reflection on the first part of this reading, which is really no more than the introduction. I encourage you, especially if you are not particularly versed in the Bible, to read the entire story, verses 1-41. The first thing that you will notice, no doubt, is that Jesus takes his merry time once he is told about his friend Lazarus' dire health and then the news of his impending death. Usually, when we receive news like that, we are on the phone. We are in the car. Family members and friends rush to the hospital or home to help in any way, to see our friend or family member one more time, or at least pay our respects. Not here. Not in this case. Jesus remains remarkably stoic and unmoved, even though, as John tells us, he loved Lazarus and he loved his entire family. They were close. Jesus, in other words, practiced social distancing when no such rule was in place and the family didn't appreciate it. Families never do, because deaths and funerals are among the touchiest times anyone can ever experience, and emotions run rampant. "Where are you, Jesus? Get your butt over here!"

Honestly, it reminds me of a recent incident when a parishioner called me about a death in the extended family, someone I didn't know. I was away at the time and didn't respond to the text right away. There was disappointment, and afterwards I was also disappointed with myself. Why had I not paid closer attention to this? Not that I could have jumped and helped right then and there, but I could have at least responded! - That's about what Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, were expecting. A response at a time when they truly needed it. Jesus though takes his merry time. Aggravating!

We could draw a few comparisons to the current social distancing rules. At this time, as we enter the third week of the quarantine rules, relatives and friends of the deceased are unfortunately forced to show their compassion from afar, to make those phone calls, send those cards and do all the things they can, short of hugging that person who could use a hug right now. There was no Corona Virus at Jesus' time and no quarantine laws. (They had other problems. Leprosy required strict social

distancing!) But if you read this text carefully, you will see that Jesus had his own reasons for social distancing. People were after him. His life was in danger, especially in the regions around Jerusalem where his face was now known and where he and his company were wanted people. When he asks his disciples two days after receiving the bad news to go to Judea, to go and see Lazarus' family, they remind him of the danger: "People there tried to stone you and now you are going back?" (I am not using the word "Jews" here but "people" because historically the gospel of John has been abused to blame "Jews" for Jesus' death. In fact, most everybody involved in this story was a Jew anyway, including Jesus, so we may just say "people.") Also, at the very end of the reading, Thomas says, "Let us also go that we may die with him." The danger, in other words, was real!

So Jesus is going back with his entourage. It was not a long journey. Nothing is a long journey in Israel, a small country with outsized importance. In this opening part of the story, John gives us an explanation for Jesus' hesitation. Twice in this introduction he hints at the purpose and plan behind the death and resurrection of Lazarus. It is to glorify God and to help the disciples and spectators to believe.

I have to admit that I am always a little skeptical of John's neat explanations. Please don't take this as disrespect for scripture, but I feel that John was the kind of person who always had a neat explanation for everything. That can be very, very annoying, especially in times of grief and hardship when everything seems to be confusing and when things usually don't make a lot of sense. Maybe you have met people who have an explanation for everything handy, including religious sayings. It is rarely helpful in that moment, because it disrespects the real experience of disorientation and grief people are going through and the possibility that God is with them in all of the confusion. John, ever the explainer, lets us know that Jesus planned this all along, that he was waiting for Lazarus to take his last breath so he could show the disciples and everyone the power of God to raise him from the dead. But keep one thing in mind, please: John wrote his gospel at least 60 years after these things took place. So just imagine someone today writing something that occurred in 1960. There is a lot of hindsight and spin involved whenever we go back that far. And explanations naturally come easier decades later. Those are also the times when explanations CAN BE helpful, when you look back and reflect and you see the bigger picture...

At the time though, I wonder whether Jesus was in fact so sure where God was leading him. I wonder whether the danger at hand was perhaps a real deterrent for him, at least initially. Was he not human? In any case, he finally decides to go to see Lazarus and his family, walks into the danger and raises him from the dead in one of the most spectacular stories of the New Testament. If you read the entire story you will notice that he shows great emotion once he gets to Bethany and sees the pain in the eyes of Mary and Martha. There the humanity of Jesus is on full display, including tears and sadness.

What does that mean for us? For one, I would like us to be extra sensitive to people who are grieving during this social distancing time. Please reach out to them. Give them a call. Write them a card. Do everything you can to ease their pain at a time when they miss not only a loved one but also the touch and comfort of friends and family. Secondly, as we try to figure out what this crisis is teaching us (and I encourage you all to look for lessons), please also keep in mind that we will figure out the true lessons over time, not right away. There is a reason why the gospels were written later and with the benefit of distance. Sometimes you see clearer from a distance. May God be with you all during these trying and unsettling times! **Amen.**