

John 11:1-37

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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?'

“Confirming Our Suspicion”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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Confirmation class joining today, it's an important and exciting day for the church, and an exciting and important day for the young people who have joined the church, and exciting and important day for their parents. Several weeks ago I asked them some questions. They gave me some answers. I asked them how we could make the church better. They said, "Maybe more mission trips." "Some Sunday instead of meeting at church, let's go to the Food Bank and help." One person said, "Let's have some more movie clips in sermons." They said, "We like to interact with people who are old. Maybe some high school kids or maybe some college kids." They said, "We really like the Methodist church, but we would like it to be more open to homosexuals in general, and that the church might allow gay pastors to be ordained and appointed." I asked them their advice on religion.

They said, "Don't tell people what to do, show them. Never make people do something, advise them." "All religions are variation on the same theme, we all worship the same God." They suggested for our church, food is an extremely good motivation in religion. And then they thought, "Maybe we could make some money on the sermons." I asked them what they like best about our church. They said, "The services are cool." "Pretty cool," actually, is what they said. And they said, "Reverend Schuster is doing a pretty good job with the services, but he's been doing it for a long time." I have been doing it for a long time, and there are things I'm pretty sure of, but there are some things I just don't understand, and I have suspicions, but there are confirmation deficits. I don't understand, for example, where God was when Adam and Eve ate the apple. I don't get that. And I don't understand why it was that they put that tree, which was supposed to be forbidden, why'd they put it in the middle of the garden? I don't get that.

I don't understand how the Red Sea parted, and how Moses and the Israelites went through it, and I don't understand why Cain killed Abel. I don't get how it was that David took out Goliath with a slingshot. I don't see how Jesus turned water into wine, if he did, and furthermore, if Jesus had wine at the last supper, at the last meal with his friends, why is it we have grape juice. I don't see that. And I don't understand, if Jesus chose his disciples and knew everything about them, why would he have chosen Judas, if Judas was going to betray him? And if Judas was going to betray him because it was part of some kind of plan, why do we think he's a villain? I don't get it. And I don't understand why Jesus had to be baptized by his cousin John in the river Jordan for the forgiveness of sins, if he didn't have any, you see? I don't understand if Jesus knew he could bring Lazarus back to life from the dead, why he cried when Lazarus dies? Those kids are right, I've been doing this a long time, and I got a lot of "don't understand." And I can't begin to address most of these issues, and if I did, they'd whip me. I wouldn't win.

But there's one I want to address today, why did Jesus weep when Lazarus died, when he knew he could bring him back to life? That's what the Gospel writer tells us. But here's what I suspect. First of all... See, I think Jesus had these friends. Mary was his friend, Martha was his friend, Lazarus was his friend. They were all related, brother and sister,

you know. I don't think they were disciples. Some people think they were. But I don't think they were disciples. I think they were friends. You're not going to have disciples who are going to be your friends. I know some of you are students. I don't think your teachers are ever going to be your friends, good friends. They're going to sometimes be your worst enemy. And I know some of you are teachers, and I don't think your students are going to be your friends, good friends. I mean, you've got a job to do, to help them bridge the yawning gap between what they know and what they have to learn, don't you see?

And Mary came to Jesus, her brother and his friend Lazarus was dying. "Can you see my brother Lazarus, your good friend's dying. Martha and I need you to come," she said. And Jesus said, "For crying out loud, Mary. He's not dying, he's sleeping." Did you ever have a friend who was sleeping? You know, walking through life asleep, kind of clueless? Sort of there but not there, you know? You say to them, "Do ever have trouble making decisions?" and they look at you straight in the face and say, "Yes and no." Some people just don't get it.

A pastor was traveling in Basel, Switzerland, and he took a seat on a streetcar next to a man who lived there. "Are you new to our city?" he asked. "Yes," said the tourist. "Is there anything you'd want to see in our city?" "Yes, I would like to see the famous theologian Karl Barth. I've read every book he's written. His writing has so influenced my life. Do you know him?" "As a matter of fact, I know him. I give him a shave with a straight-edge razor every morning." And that preacher tourist got off of that streetcar, flew back to this country, got into his pulpit the next Sunday, told his congregation, "You'd never believe who I met in Basel, Switzerland. I met Karl Barth's barber." (8:00 people didn't get it, just for the record. I think they were sleeping.) He met Karl Barth. Didn't know it. Talk about not knowing, talk about being asleep. Lazarus would have done that. The name Lazarus means "God has helped us." Jesus knows God helps us if we help ourselves. Jesus would tell him and tell him, "Lazarus, wake up." If you've got a friend who's asleep, you're going to tell him to wake up.

This past week, the Methodist Church had this video conference. You could go someplace and watch it with other people, or you could tune in. You can do this too, I'll give you the web page. It's three hours of bishops speaking, telling us about the church and how we need to wake it up, and how we need to have vital congregations, and how we need to move the church forward. I didn't go to any of those conferences, but I did look up the website on my own little computer. It was set up so that, as the thing was moving along, you could make your own response to it, and it would appear in writing. You'd type it in with your computer. You'd put it in with your computer, and you could see it there. I'm listening. It's three hours, and it's about an hour, which is as much as I could take, frankly, and I'm listening to this and then on the side of the screen here's this message that comes from some pastor in Ohio who didn't give anybody his name. I wouldn't either, but this is what he said. "I'm in a room of 95 people and there are only 5 of us who are awake."

I know you've heard this one. A man went to see his doctor for his annual physical. The conclusion, the testing, the monitoring, the doctor said, "The best thing you can do is give up alcohol, stop smoking cigars, stop eating red meat, start eating lots of fruits and vegetables, take a two-mile walk every day and exercise, and stop watching so much TV." And he said to the doctors, "What's the next best thing?"

Wake up! Lazarus is asleep. When Mary told Jesus he was dying, Jesus said he's asleep, he's always been asleep, there's lots he could have done but he didn't. There's lots he could contribute but he won't, and you never hear about Lazarus again. Harvard Business School, Anthony Mayo, Director and Nitin Nohria, Dean, co-authored a book which collected data from 860 top executives. (*In Their Time: The Greatest Business Leaders of the 20th Century*). They divided leaders into three types: mold-makers (entrepreneurs), mold-breakers (charismatics) and mold-takers (managers.) They're all good, they're all effective at what they do, but there's one thing they all had in common, and that was the ability to read the forces that shape the times in which they lived, and to seize on the resulting opportunities. Waking up, or as Dag Hammarskjold said, to find the quality of mind to mirror life and the strength of character to mold it. Lazarus was asleep. Jesus spent his life day and night with his friend trying to wake him up. "For cryin' out loud, Lazarus, wake up!"

Second thought: Why Jesus wept. Because I think tears came to his eyes as Megan selected the quotes in the bulletin, she did the whole worship service this morning, it was her idea. She did, don't you think, a great job? (Applause) This quote by Emerson is one of my favorites. "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." Oh, my goodness. What's within us? I don't think it made him dry or weep, but I bet it brought tears to his eyes. What lies within us. What was within Jesus? What's within you and me? He got there too late. Lazarus had died. It brought tears to his eyes. Sometimes we mean well, but our efforts are not helpful, because we get there too late.

Man and woman at night, ready for bed, light is on in the garden shed. She looks out the window. She says to her husband, "Go over there and look." And he does. He looks out the window, and there are people stealing stuff from the back yard shed, taking his lawn mower and tools. He calls the police, tells them "Look what's happening, they're stealing my stuff." The dispatcher says, "There's nobody in the area, nobody's going to come." Hangs up. Calls back two minutes later, says to the dispatcher, "You know I called you a few minutes ago because there were thieves in our back yard stealing my stuff? You don't need to worry about them now. I shot all of them." Within five minutes, six police cars appeared. They caught the thieves. One of the cops said to him, "I thought you said you shot them?" He said, "I thought you said there was nobody available." They showed up.

Jesus didn't show up. He got there late. But he did his best. That's all we can do. Mary and Martha were upset with him. I think that brought tears to his eyes. It would. There probably isn't a parent in this room who hasn't heard or won't have heard their son or their daughter say to them, "You know, I wish I could have chosen different parents, because I gotta tell ya, you don't let me do the things that my friends get to do." And I'll bet you

that there isn't a kid in this room who won't have had or hasn't had somebody say to them, "You've disappointed me. You've disappointed me." Maybe it's a teacher or maybe it's a friend or coach, or maybe it's a mom or a dad. "You've disappointed me..." That brings tears to your eyes. We let them down. That brings tears to our eyes. Maybe we could do better than we do, but we're doing our best when we're the only ones we know. Maybe what we did turned out exactly wrong, but did we try to do some good? Maybe they told us that we'd never amount to much, but what they didn't know was how far we came with what it was we got, to get what we are. Sometime they'll even praise us for how great we are. They don't know how much greater we could be.

I asked these kids when they came down, have you ever been applauded by that many people? One of them said, "No, I got booed by that many people one time." Tears come to our eyes when others tell us that they are disappointed in us. Tears came to Jesus' eyes. He didn't get there in time, and what drove him was not the judgment of others, you know, however hard it was. It was the expectation he had for himself. It's what was within him. Nobody pushes any of us harder than we push ourselves. Nobody judges us to the standard that we judge for ourselves. It's not just what we do, but it's what God does through us that matters. It's not just performance, it's also intent. It's not just final result, it's also motivation.

Jesus pushed himself to turn water into wine, or turn angry hearts toward good. He did. He pushed himself to stand with sinners and those who were on the margin of things, when others said "Leave them alone." He pushed himself to speak to a world as it could be, when most people were trying to resolve and live in the world as best they could with what they knew it to be. He pushed himself to go into Jerusalem. We'll talk about that next week, when many people were saying "You're an idiot, don't go in there." He did what he thought he could, and when he knew he could have done better, he owned it. When others told him what he must do, he did his best as he saw it.

I got to be with the Confirmation Class one Sunday afternoon. I tried to show them how United Methodists think, and how we each have a right to our own ideas. I tried to suggest that each of us has a responsibility to speak up, and then I discussed with them several controversial issues. I told them what I thought, and I told them that I was right, of course, and I asked them what they thought. And several members of the group looked at me and told me that they disagreed with me, and told me why, precisely, they disagreed. And there was this long silence, and I had tears in my eyes, because I know our church has a great future, because these kids who understand what it means to think through what they believe is right and to speak it out when there is a responsibility to say it. I still think they're wrong. Well, maybe not.

Jesus got to Lazarus too late, and Mary and Martha told him he should have come sooner, and he had tears in his eyes. Lazarus was asleep, for cryin' out loud. Finally, Jesus wept. Later, he brought Lazarus back from the dead, so John tells us. He wept when he saw Mary and Martha in grief. That I think is the reason he wept. He had compassion, he cared, because they were hurting. He might have told them not to be sad because death is... you know, we believe in the resurrection of the dead, but he didn't. He could have

told them that people of faith are not afraid to die, and we shouldn't be sad because our loved ones are in a better place, but he didn't. He could have told them that there's some kind of plan, that maybe this is God's will. But he didn't. He could have told them that Lazarus's death was kind of a preparation for his own, that he would be crucified and in three days be raised from the dead. But he didn't do that. He looked at the tears streaming down their cheeks and he wept. He had compassion. He cared.

Sue Monk Kidd in her book *First Light*, this story. "During a particularly painful time in my life, I sat in my bedroom and cried, tears glazing my eyes. I had offered my hurt to God, but the aching hadn't stopped. Healing comes, I know, but with time, and it hadn't come, and the tears are part of the process. I understand that, but there were wet splotches on my blouse and that's how my husband Sandy found me when he came home from work. He didn't say a word, but in what surely is the most precious moment in our marriage, he walked over to where I was. He sat on the bed, he took his finger and he stroked it across my cheeks where the tears were flowing, and he put his wet finger on his own face and let those tears come. His gesture went straight to my heart more than words can ever say. My sadness lightened. It just felt like he took half of it on himself."

That's what it means to care. That's why Jesus wept. I think Anne LaMott has it right when she says, "To Christians, death is just a change of address." But that doesn't diminish the sadness that comes when death comes, nor does it mock our grief as inappropriate. It matters. It matters intensely and ultimately. Jesus wept because his friends were hurting. He wept because he cared. First, he thought Lazarus was asleep, for cryin' out loud. He spent his whole life trying to wake him up. You and I all know people who need to wake up. He got there late, tears came to his eyes because he did his best, but he got there late. He failed them, and he knew it. And when people hurt, we hurt. Jesus hurt. We care. He cared. We have compassion. He had compassion. We weep like Jesus wept. That's why I think he wept. It's a suspicion. I don't know if we can make any money on this sermon, but that's a suspicion. And those kids are right, I've been doing this a long time, and there are some things I'm not sure of. Like, I don't know for sure why Jesus wept, but I know this. If we're asleep in life, let's wake up. And if we fail our friends and they tell us, let's own it, but let's live to the measure of our own determined effort to do our best, because it's what's inside. And if we see someone hurting, let's be with them and cry with them, knowing words aren't the only way to say we care. Of that I'm sure. That is a suspicion I can confirm, and if you agree, pass it on. Well, that's our hymn.