

Lent 5, 2014

John 11

It is not Easter yet. Then we will say, “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death has no dominion over him.” But that is not what Lazarus gets to say. He *will* die again; death still has dominion over him. Therefore his story has an element of sadness, even in its dramatic climax, when Jesus says, “unbind him; let him go.” For me, the ending is less interesting than the dynamics which lead up to it.

This story gives a closer picture of interpersonal relationships than most gospel stories. Of the four main characters, only Lazarus is something of a cipher. We are told the others love him; he gets sick and dies. That is all. I wonder if he was the indulged younger brother of two proud sisters.

A key to the story is love. This is a trite thing to say. But love is what makes us human: receiving it, allowing it to shape our personalities, passing it on in significant relationships--or enduring the loneliness when the kind of love we want is absent or no longer there.

We are told that Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus. This seems to mean the “ordinary” kind of love, our kind. Though not supernatural, it is a great kind. It means accepting the other, with all the idiosyncracies at a deep level. Each character here is distinctive. Martha bustles; Mary languishes; Lazarus is emotionally remote.

Martha’s extroversion serves others. Her family benefits from her ability to get a meal on the table. But intellectually she stays on the surface. She meets Jesus in the road, and their conversation is entirely correct, but it doesn’t go anywhere. It doesn’t empower. On the other hand, when she steps back to give her sister center stage, her humility is a beautiful thing.

Mary is a dreamer. Her passivity is exasperating. When Martha goes to meet Jesus in the road, Mary stays sitting in the house. I would like to shake her. When Martha insists she *get up*, she rises quickly and runs out of the house. She falls at Jesus’ feet, and laments. She is impulsive and theatrical. On the other hand, she is more deeply in touch with the tragedy of her brother’s death than the others. It might be said that she puts Jesus in touch with *his* grief. On another occasion Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with precious ointment. The fragrance of the ointment “fills the house,” which is a way of

saying that everyone is exalted by her action. Mary is impractical, but her impracticality reaches places that Martha's housekeeping does not.

Dare I do any character analysis on Jesus, from a human viewpoint? He is more divine in John's gospel than in any other New Testament writer. But here his delay, not coming when requested, seems callous. Oh, he justifies it ("it was for your sake that I came late"), but in anyone not sinless, this would sound like a guilty conscience. His behavior becomes more understandable and humane when he grieves, which seems to hold the power of this miracle.

First, uniquely in the gospels, Jesus weeps. Lazarus seems to be gone to a place beyond reach. Jesus feels lonely and abandoned, no less than the sisters feel.

Second, also uniquely, Jesus groans in spirit—he does so twice. Alternate readings—being troubled, feeling perturbed—seem inadequate for the gut-wrenching physicality of grief. When a loved one dies we protest; we long for the impossible, for the person to come back. Such experience is described by Paul in Romans 8. "The whole creation groans in agony; and not only creation, but we ourselves groan inwardly as we await redemption. We cannot pray as we should, so the Spirit prays for us in groans too deep for words."

But Jesus does use words, as we must. This is the third phase. His words are surprisingly self-effacing. "Thank you, Father, for hearing me. You always do. But now I ask that you confirm what I do." Then follow the loud cry and the coming forth. We are left to imagine the reaction. Heads may have turned away in horror. There is as much anxiety as delight in any profound experience. We enter the story by bringing our own unmanageable experience.

It is a case study in primal realities. From these not even love or faith can shield us. The Lazarus story does not end neatly: for the main characters it seems unfinished. We would like to know what happened to them. So I will add an epilogue from the HBO series "Six Feet Under." Devotees know this as the edgy adventures of a family-run funeral home in Los Angeles. A minor character, Tracy Montrose-Blair, is a pretty, perky, chattering, and obnoxious, funeral-groupie. She sniffs out death rituals the way the rest of us sniff out Starbucks. She gets a thrill from giving canned condolence, and putting

the moves on an emotionally unavailable undertaker. Death definitely has dominion over her.

Then there is an amazing scene. She comes to the funeral home to say, “My Aunt Lillian is dead. Her husband and daughter died in a car accident many years ago, but she lived on. She raised Welsh corgis and took up watercolor painting. She loved me; she was the only one who did. My parents found me annoying (as you do), and my ex-husband certainly didn’t love me. I have always been lonely, but now I’m finding there’s a whole new dimension to loneliness that I had never imagined. My Aunt Lillian is dead.”

Immaculate in black dress and pearls (her groupie attire), Tracy Montrose-Blair is no longer trivial or obnoxious. She lifts her tear-stained face to ask, “Why do people have to die?” Not being Jesus, the young undertaker does the best he can. “To make life important. None of us knows how long we’ve got. So we must make each day matter. It sounds like Aunt Lillian did that. So you can be happy for her. For a life well-lived.”

This is not all the Lazarus story has to say. But it is not a fantasy story making the power and pain of death disappear. Instead it speaks symbolically. Under the anguish there is goodness, joy, and life, which, as Jesus shows, not even death can destroy. In the epilogue Tracy is the dead one, our representative. As she was raised up by Aunt Lillian’s love, so may we, in our losses, be raised to the place where death has no dominion.

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