

Bringing our grief into conversation with Jesus

Series: Keeping Hearts Alive For The Long Run

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Edgar King

Mental health, Grief

John 11:1-35

So the few times I have been around people who are are grieving the loss of a loved one, one of the hard things I see is many do not feel allowed to grieve by people around them.

Sadly sometimes in church culture, we sometimes have a poor theology of suffering and a leaning towards triumphalism. Where we think that because we follow Jesus nothing should and can go wrong in our lives. Which often makes people in grief not feel free to just grief. By the way, the story where nothing wrong ever happens to those who follow Jesus is strange to the Bible. It tells the story of a King who took up a cross and died for his people.

And so many times when asked to say something in such gatherings because I am the pastor, all I have felt I needed to say was, we permit you to grieve and we will be here even as you ask some hard and angry questions of God.” Almost every time the bereaved would later say, they had no idea it was okay even in grief to be angry at God.

Captured in the words of a friend who after I said that cried and said, “ I am angry at God. I did my part, my family did theirs, the church did theirs it seems that only God did not.”

We have been walking through a series about bringing our reality into conversation with Jesus. The aim is to keep our hearts alive during this protracted season of hardship but even for the long run. The extent to which we are bringing our reality into conversation with Jesus is the measure of how alive our hearts are.

This season has been challenging and even just terrible for some in different ways. And the weight on emotional, mental and for some physical health is undeniable. We have been naming some of those things that we have felt we had to deal with and inviting the whole church to bring those realities into conversation with Jesus.

The night won't last. Joy is coming in the morning. Hope has a name and the name is Jesus. Yet while it is still dark, while it is still heavy Jesus' invitation stands. “Come to me, all you who are tired and weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”

Today we will talk about grief. There has just been a lot that has been lost this year. Opportunities lost, jobs lost. Identities stripped. Very personal loses for so many across society.

Then there is a sense of societal grief as we all lost what we thought was the normal way of life. One phrase being thrown around a lot is 'the new normal'. Which tell you that we are all aware of something that has been replaced. Unfortunately by something unpleasant.

The loss of people's heroes. So many this year. Last week it was the Wakanda lead actor Chadwick. We are all caught up in a moment of grief and loss. A common statement I keep hearing is, "Can 2020 get any worse?"

And sadly, some people have lost loved ones to COVID, suicide because of the depression of COVID. And sadly to other things too but travel and gathering restrictions did not allow some a proper send-off.

Where do we take all our grief? Or in the words of one theologian, Whitney Houston, 'Where do broken hearts go?'

I want you to join me in a different story again. Jesus stepping into both personal, family and community grief. It is the story of 3 siblings, 2 sisters and their brother, who were very close friends with Jesus and his disciples, especially Jesus. Let's jump in.

John 11:1-35

In the village of Bethany, there was a man named Lazarus, and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Mary was the one who would anoint Jesus' feet with costly perfume and dry his feet with her long hair. One day Lazarus became very sick to the point of death. So his sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, our brother Lazarus, the one you love, is very sick. Please come!"

When he heard this, he said, "This sickness will not end in death for Lazarus, but will bring glory and praise to God. This will reveal the greatness of the Son of God by what takes place."

Now even though Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he remained where he was for two more days. Finally, on the third day, he said to his disciples, "Come. It's time to go to Bethany."

So after news that his friend is very sick he still stays longer and says it won't end in death. After staying a few days he is ready to go to Bethany. And this does not look like such a good idea for him and his disciples.

Jesus was not safe in Bethany. People of Judea had plotted to kill him not long before this moment. So the disciples don't get why he wants to go there. I mean, the 3 siblings were his friends, but was it that much to risk his life? So they try to deter him.

So his response is basically, "be cool, let's not let fear control us if we are in God's light." Then he reveals another pressing reason.

Lets' read on.

Then Jesus added, "Lazarus, our friend, has just fallen asleep. It's time that I go and awaken him."

When they heard this, the disciples replied, "Lord, if he has just fallen asleep, then he'll get better." Jesus was speaking about Lazarus' death, but the disciples presumed he was talking about natural sleep.

Then Jesus made it plain to them, "Lazarus is dead. And for your sake, I'm glad I wasn't there, because now you have another opportunity to see who I am so that you will learn to trust in me. Come, let's go and see him."

So Thomas, nicknamed the Twin, remarked to the other disciples, "Let's go so that we can die with him."

Their good friend is dead. He does not say that at first. So they do not want to go there. So they think if he is sleeping, great. After all, we had he was unwell and sleep might do him some good. But no need to put themselves at risk there again.

This is how scared the disciples are. If he is asleep, no need to go. He is fine, it's not like he is dead. Then Jesus tells them, "No actually I mean he is dead." Then they go, what use are we then, now we go and be killed too."

This should give us a glimpse of how much danger it seemed they were in where they were going. But even better just how much God would risk his life to do the works of the Kingdom, which in this case were raising a man from the dead and comforting grieving friends, what could stand in the way of God coming beside you and me and a grieving world?

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing will stand in his way. Not theology, not church reputation, not politics. Nothing that is distracting people in this season will keep God from what he is doing in the world which bringing hope and resurrection and most importantly comforting his people in the darkness we have sat in.

I just want to start there. The reason Jesus is going back to Bethany, despite the apparent risk to his life and that of his disciples is that his friends have lost a loved one. Jesus said, he only does what he sees the Father doing. He is all about the Kingdom of God. And even at this point, he has already pre-empted, at least to us the readers of the story, that he will raise him from the dead. But is it not amazing that for God, the grief of this family mattered.

So many times I have been amazed at how Jesus keeps showing that loving people us saying yes to interruption. Love is not convenient. Every time Jesus was stopped by someone who needed compassion no matter what his agenda for the day was, he would stop, sometimes even change course.

When some pastors are wanting to have the fastest jets to not be disrupted on their way to the next crusade, Jesus lived his life welcoming interruptions to his day to show God's love. And this time it was for a family that had experienced the ultimate loss; the loss of a loved one.

If you will love people in this season and the next, get ready for interruption. It will interrupt your schedule, your budgets, your convenience and even your emotions.

Something else that caught my attention is that when Jesus received the news he said Lazarus won't die. Then he did. So if you are the messenger who went with that message to the sisters when the guy was still sick, you must be crushed by the time he died.

The guy in whom you had all your hope in has listened to the report you gave and said there was nothing to worry about. He won't die.

Even worse, how are the sisters feeling? They must have eased up when they heard that response from Jesus. This was the guy. He healed the sick, he prophecies, he had words of wisdom, words of knowledge. If he said he would not die, he would not die.

And sometimes those who know the story to the end go, "Oh well, Jesus did not mean he won't die, he knew he was going to raise him from the dead" I don't think that's the case, but let's just for a second focus on what the two sisters heard. And what they must have felt when he did die. Disappointed? Abandoned? Lied to? Like Jesus did not play his part? If he could make a difference, and he very well could, why didn't he?

In the possible questions they had, I hear the words of a friend of mine after losing her daughter she said, "I am angry at God. I played my part, my family played its part, the church played their part, but it seems God did not."

In those possible questions, I hear the questions that many might be having now. If God could, and he very well can, why did he not do anything when I lost my job when I lost that opportunity when I lost that relationship when I lost the one I loved."

Reading on

Now when they arrived at Bethany, which was only about two miles from Jerusalem, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Many friends of Mary and Martha had come from the region to console them over the loss of their brother. And when Martha heard that Jesus was approaching the village, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house

Martha said to Jesus, "My Lord, if only you had come sooner, my brother wouldn't have died. But I know that if you were to ask God for anything, he would do it for you."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise and live."

She replied, "Yes, I know he will rise with everyone else on resurrection day."

"Martha," Jesus said, "You don't have to wait until then. I am[g] the Resurrection, and I am Life Eternal. Anyone who clings to me in faith, even though he dies, will live forever. And the one who lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Then Martha replied, "Yes, Lord, I do! I've always believed that you are the Anointed One, the Son of God who has come into the world for us!"

Then she left and hurried off to her sister, Mary, and called her aside from all the mourners and whispered to her, "The Master is here and he's asking for you."

Martha dashes to meet Jesus. This is reckless abandon. Here is their friend. When our hearts are broken and we are in grief, there are just certain voices we long to hear. Some people words and presence weigh 1000 tons.

I think the two sisters longed for Jesus' presence and company. Surrounded by other family and friends, and as would be in this culture, some professional mourners, she wanted to hear from Jesus more.

And I think it is two things. One, this was a personal friend and a close one. Two is captured in her confession, that this was the Christ. She wanted to hear what God had to say. She knew at this point that only God could bring comfort. Just like some of us sitting in our grief going, 'God, say something' Sadly for others in the desperation the statement ends with, "I'm giving up on you."

When Mary finally found Jesus outside the village, she fell at his feet in tears and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus looked at Mary and saw her weeping at his feet, and all her friends who were with her grieving, he shuddered with emotion[m] and was deeply moved with tenderness and compassion. He said to them, "Where did you bury him?"

"Lord, come with us and we'll show you," they replied.

Then tears streamed down Jesus' face.

So the other sister is here now and her words are the same. Where have you been? Why did you not make it different?

This is what it looks like when we bring grief into conversation with Jesus. It's not running away from it. It is not pretending that we understand why. It is not pretending that we don't even in a low key way to feel abandoned by Him. Instead, it is running right into his arms and saying all that to Him. That how we wish he would have acted sooner and into our liking.

And Jesus did bring Lazarus back to life. Just like he is resurrecting the world around us and you and me. There are hope and life. But right before he did, he cried. Even though he knew that he would turn this around it mattered to him. His friend had died, his friends were grieving. It moved him.

It is not just about the hope that is coming. It is not just about the coming Kingdom of God in the long run where there are no more tears and no more pain, your grief moves God, it matters to him. Even though he knows how the story ends. Even though he knows that it works out for the good of all who trust in him and for the glory of God, it moves him and even moves him to tears.

Yet again, Jesus does what he always does, he offers himself. In moments of grief, there is not much anyone could say that would change anything.

In this series, I have said that it is one thing to say that this is what society is going through, it is different to this is what you are going through. It is one thing to say there is an economic slowdown, it is another to say that you lost a job. It is one thing to talk about the lives lost to COVID and suicide, it is another to say you lost someone you loved. This is happening to you, to us.

No clever words can be said to snap things back to normal. And even in this Jesus invites you into conversation and offers himself. Jesus did not offer great theology. When people are grieving, when people are desperate, they are not looking for some great interpretation of scripture. They are not looking for new political heroes. It is not the time to correct their theology. Jesus offers himself and says, “Martha, I am life itself.”

It amazes me how many psalms are actually psalms of lamenting. Complaining, feeling hurt while at the same time declaring our trust in God. We can bring our reality into conversation with Jesus and let him bring himself. Just like he offered himself for his body to be broken and blood to be shed for us.

*I'm hurting, Lord—will you forget me forever?
How much longer, Lord?
Will you look the other way when I'm in need?*

*How much longer must I cling to this constant grief?
I've endured this shaking of my soul.
So how much longer will my enemy have the upper hand?
It's been long enough!*

*Take a good look at me, God, and answer me!
Breathe your life into my spirit.
Bring light to my eyes in this pitch-black darkness
or I will sleep the sleep of death.*

*Don't let my enemy proclaim, "I've prevailed over him."
For all my adversaries will celebrate when I fall.*

*Lord, I have always trusted in your kindness, so answer me.
I will yet celebrate with passion and joy
when your salvation[d] lifts me up.*

*I will sing my song of joy to you, the Most High,
for in all of this you have strengthened my soul.
My enemies say that I have no Savior,
but I know that I have one in you!*

Let's Pray