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John 11:1-45

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

IF THE LORD HAD BEEN HERE

There is a short story by John L'Heureux called "The Expert on God." The author, a former priest, tells about a priest who has doubts that have taken over his life. For years he has been riddled with skepticism about certain doctrines of the faith, but only for a while and only concerning one doctrine at a time. Yet it eventually dawned on him that he doubted the love of God, and that doubt stuck with him. He prayed for greater faith, and when that did not come, he prayed for hope. And when that did not come, he went on with his priestly duties, as an expert on God, teaching, preaching, and leading worship. He wanted to have a sense of God's presence in his daily life, but it just wasn't there. That's how things stood with him on the day of the accident.

After saying mass on Christmas morning, he was heading home. As he drove through the icy countryside, he marveled at the absence of God even on that day, saying to himself, "It doesn't matter anymore." That's when he saw the two-car wreck. One car was damaged, with people standing around it, but the other smaller car was crumpled nearly in two. As he looked in, he saw a young man who was clearly dying in the wreckage. He pulled out a vial of oil he carried with him and anointed the man for last rites. He prayed fervently, desperately. But there was no help coming. God was utterly silent.¹

God - absent in a time of need? Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were siblings who were friends with Jesus. When Lazarus had gotten quite ill, Martha and Mary had sent word urging Jesus to come. But by the time Jesus got the message and got to Bethany, where they lived, it was too late. Lazarus was dead and had already been entombed. Face to face, Jesus encounters Martha, and then her sister, Mary. The sisters each say the exact same thing to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus had not been there when they needed him. The gospel writer does not give us a sense as to the feelings being expressed by each woman. There could have been anger that their friend, the one on whom they relied, had not gotten there more quickly. There is a sense of regret and sadness in their words. But there is also an underlying faith expressed in their statement - they believed his presence could have made a life and death difference, which is why there is so much pain in these words.

Martha, the sister who went to Jesus first, after speaking about Jesus having been absent in her time of need, perhaps catches herself, and begins to affirm her rich faith that God could work through Jesus in a very special way. She tells him that she understands him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, in perhaps the fullest expression of faith found in the gospel account. Jesus says some intriguing things to Martha about God's power to give life, but she doesn't have a sense as to what Jesus would do. Then upon Jesus' encouragement, she goes to get her sister, so that she can have some time with Jesus as well.

When Mary comes to Jesus, she falls at his feet before making the same statement about his absence that Martha had expressed before her. That was all Mary could articulate before she began to cry. Our Lord joins her grief with his own tears. Notice, Jesus does not defend his absence to either of the sisters. Neither does he chide them for their honest expression. Rather he allows them to lament before Martha makes her faith statement with words and Mary expresses her faith with her actions. A chapter later in John's account, Mary would fall at Jesus' feet again, this time in order to anoint them with expensive ointment and wipe them with her hair. It's as if John wants us to understand that it is o.k., even spiritually healthy to express one's grief and difficulty with what has

been experienced as a Godly absence. Honest expressions about one's experience and need do not undermine faith – they enhance it.

Returning to L'Heureux's story, the priest faced a critical moment at the scene of the crash. He was searching for what to do even as he thinks God has left him on his own in a difficult situation. In the final part of the story, the priest thinks to himself: "What would God do at such a moment, if there were a God?" "Well, do it," he said aloud, and heard the fury in his voice. "Say something." But there was silence from heaven...

"What could anyone say to this crushed, dying thing, he wondered. What would God say if he cared as much as I?... The priest could see death beginning across the boy's face. And still he could say nothing..."

"The boy turned – some dying reflex – and his head tilted in the priest's arms, trusting like a lover. And at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gave up his prayers and bent to him and whispered, fierce and burning. 'I love you,' and continued until there was no breath, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.'"

The so called expert on God, even when he perceived heaven as being silent, in my mind, got it right. Jesus, God personified, was limited to being in one place at a time. God as Spirit is not limited in the same way. However, our human limitations can at times make it seem like God is utterly absent. When this happens, particularly at a time of great need, it can be as destabilizing as an earthquake. A caring community of faith is critically important, particularly at such a time. It can convey the love of God, even when it doesn't seem real to someone.

That love does not take away what can lead to heartache and a deep sense of loss. There are times when we see people suffer or other times when someone dies all too young and we too have a great need to express, "Lord, if only it could have been different!" Even though Jesus raised Lazarus' body back to life, we recognize that he and his sisters eventually died. There were people who experienced that as painful loss.

And yet, there is something that undergirds us in these difficult life passages. Even when we can't sense it, there is an undying love of God that seeks to embrace us in life and in death. That love can take our expressions of grief, and it joins with us in them. It is a love that continues to reach out to us in times of bewilderment, anger, or despair, planting seeds of hope for this life and beyond. It is a love that says the story is not yet over, calling forth a dead man or a dead faith from a tomb. Such a love inspires us to act even when we don't know what else to do. I don't know whether there is anyone who thinks I might be an expert on God, but I don't think we go far wrong when we come to believe that the life-giving thing God wants to say to us and through us is: "I love you, I love you, I love you."

¹ John L'Heureux, "The Expert on God," found in Comedians, Viking Adult, 1990.