

Sermon for 7-31-2016 Third Sunday in BGO - "God's Story, My Story, Our Story: Among Friends"
 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (NLT), John 14:22-27 (Message), John 11:17-37 (NIV)

Those who attended the church services the first two Sundays this month might remember that we had a couple of "getting to know the Pastor" sermons, where I shared some of my story with you, while connecting my life with the lives of some of the people from the Bible. I think we all have at 1 time or another saw ourselves reflected in Scripture that way. Sometimes we see a bit of ourselves in all of the characters in the stories. Take the parable of the Good Samaritan; sometimes we feel like the beaten man along the side of the road, sometimes we act like the Pharisee who passed him by, while other times we reach out like the Good Samaritan.

A recommendation by "church experts" is to have those "getting to know you" kind of sermons for the first few months starting with a new church, and have all the sermon topics scheduled out even before stepping through the doors. But there are times in our lives together that take our schedules and throw them out the window.

So we'll take the guy I was going to talk about today and set him aside for later. Today let's take a look at the account of Jesus and His interactions with Martha, Mary, Lazarus and the crowd. Because I've seen myself reflected in every person presented in the passage.

The passage starts with Martha. Remember these are friends: this is the Martha & Mary & Lazarus from Luke's Gospel, where Jesus eats with them, where Martha is all work, all business, & Mary is content to sit at the Master's feet. So it shouldn't be a surprise that Martha charges out to meet Jesus, while Mary sits, dealing with the grief of losing her brother...alone.

Just like Martha, I've come at Jesus with the "IF's" of my life:
 "If I had only been able to work faster, I would have still had the job";
 "If I'd have stayed home that night, she wouldn't have fallen and needed stitches";
 And I've come to Christ saying - no, demanding -
 "I know that even now you can fix it, if you wanted to."
 I've been like the crowd too,
 asking why the miracle came for someone else and not for me.
 And Jesus does fix it: He brings the miracle,
 though not the miracle I might have looked for.

For Jesus, it's not a question of revisiting our past or our plans for the future; Because he knows the plans He has for us, plans to prosper and give a good future.

The question is whether we trust Him, in His goodness & love, in the here & now. So he reminds Martha - reminds us - that those who believe have salvation in Him, with the promise of being well and whole in the resurrection at the last day, but even more, those who believe will have His presence not just to see them through, but see miracles in the midst of it. It's the miracle that the crowd will be shown, though their sightless hearts will remain hardened toward Jesus.

But Jesus saves His most heartfelt response when I come to Him like Mary, falling at His feet in the midst of my struggles, all my pain exposed to His healing. It's then that He walks with me, or carries me as the need might be.

Do I see it right away? Sometimes yes, if I'm paying attention.

Then again, sometimes no. At times I'm even like Lazarus, so sick in heart and soul that I'm dead to the things around me.

If you remember the story, Jesus brings new life and resurrection to Lazarus, but he calls out for those in the crowd to roll back the stone.

That's what I need in my life at times, too:

someone to come and help me know God is there with me.

You see, that's when we are most like Jesus, when we enter into other's lives, dancing with them in their joys, and especially walking with them in their struggles.

I was told in a pastoral care class

that when we are visiting someone who is sick or is grieving, we don't just represent Jesus as ambassadors of the faith, we RE-PRESENT Jesus - we show them Jesus reflected in us.

That takes us being present, being part of what is going on, maybe even shedding a tear or two on others' behalf.

It was back when our daughter Nikki was a teenager

that we took a trip to Oklahoma City for a national convention she was involved in.

While we were there, we visited the site of the Oklahoma City bombing, where 168 people were killed by the explosion, 18 of them children.

There was a church across the street, and on its grounds a statue of Jesus with his head buried in his hands: the inscription on the base, "*Jesus wept.*"

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about the statue troubled me.

Then it hit me: The statue of Jesus was turned AWAY from the site of the bombing!

My spirit cried out NO! Jesus would never turn away,

not from the cries of the wounded, not from children, His Children.

“*Jesus wept*” - the shortest verse in the Bible, and one of the most profound. Jesus shared the suffering of his friends, their sense of pain and loss. But His tears went even deeper. Jesus recognized how pain, and struggle, and even death itself, were only symptoms of a sin-sick world, a world far away from what Father, Son & Spirit had intended from the beginning. The only answer for a world like that is resurrection, is re-creation. Jesus calls out, “*Lazarus, come forth!*”

and the once-dead man comes from the tomb.

In that act Jesus demonstrated in one human life what he would do for all humanity. Because the day would come when He would go to the cross, the sightless crowd echoing the words at Lazarus’ grave:

“He saved others, why can’t he save himself?”

They didn’t see that in giving Himself, He would serve as the sacrifice that would bring healing to our sin-sick world and defeat sin and death, once and for all.

And until that day when that truth is made fully manifest on earth, the Friend, the Holy Spirit, resides in us, so that we don’t have to feel abandoned, that we can find the peace that passes all understanding.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that day will come like a thief in the night. But he also reminds us that *God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever.*

God the Father comes with arms wide open to hold us close in our hurt, but WE won’t know the extent of that love until we accept the embrace. Jesus offers us a new life, a resurrection life, but it’s an offer: presented, not forced. The Holy Spirit comes to empower us to live in newness of life, but he comes as a friend, waiting to be invited in. Folks, allow God to move into your neighborhood, into your life, into your heart. Then encourage each other and build each other up with the Good News of a love that will not let us go.