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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #32
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Sermon Summary #32

Do You Believe This? John 11:1-48, 55-57; 12:9-11

I'm happy to say today that Jesus and I share at least one thing in common: neither of us likes funerals. But, then again, I've never met anyone else who does enjoy funerals, with the exception of the mortician!

I think all of us would agree that funerals are a necessary evil. Unfortunately, there's little we can do about them other than attend and try to console and encourage those whose loved ones have died. But Jesus took a different approach. Jesus didn't merely attend funerals. He disrupted them by raising the dead person back to life! A man named Jairus, an official of the synagogue, asked Jesus to heal his daughter. When he arrived, she was already dead and the funeral had begun. Jesus put an end to it by raising her to life (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43). On another occasion, Jesus encountered a funeral procession in the town called Nain. A woman had lost her only son and was preparing for his burial. He stopped the proceedings and raised that young man back to life again (Luke 7:11-17).

It's obvious that Jesus didn't care much for death. And there's no better proof of that than the story of Lazarus, known to everyone who has any familiarity with the Bible. But the story recorded in John 11 is not primarily about Lazarus. Nor is it principally concerned with his sisters, Mary and Martha. The focus of attention is Jesus.

This is an extremely lengthy narrative with numerous details that we cannot address in one message. So my aim today is to highlight several things that it reveals about Jesus, and one massively important truth about human beings in general.

What does this story tell us about Jesus?

First, Jesus was someone who looked at everything, both in life and in death, in terms of its potential to glorify the Father.

Jesus was passionately preoccupied with glorifying the Father. We see this in v. 4 and again in v. 40. We saw this in our study of John 9:3 where Jesus declared that the man's congenital blindness was not due to the sin of his parents or anyone else but in order that the Father might be glorified.

Here in John 11:4, Jesus doesn't mean that Lazarus won't die. The illness was indeed fatal. His point is that it will not end, ultimately, in death. In fact, it will end in resurrection from death and thereby glorify the Father. But it will also glorify the Son as the one whom the Father has sent.

Try to envision what your life would be like if you were to adopt the perspective of Jesus. Instead of bitterness or resentment or impatience or anger and frustration, or constantly asking "Why? Why? Why?" consider how your circumstances and experiences might serve to bring honor and praise to God. Everyone else in this story, including his disciples as well as Mary, Martha, and all their family and friends, could only see tragedy in the death of Lazarus. Jesus saw it as just one more opportunity to shed light on the majesty and power of God.

Second, Jesus was a lover, but he loved his friends and he loves us for reasons entirely different from what we might expect.

Look at John 11:3, 5. Here we are told that Jesus loved Lazarus, and again that he loved Martha and Mary. This is a good reminder to us that there are levels of friendship and intimacy in the life of Jesus that the four gospels rarely explore. It reminds us that at least a few people felt unusually loved by Jesus.

To many people, this makes no sense. *If he loved them all so much why did he let Lazarus die?* If he really loved Martha and Mary, wouldn't he have spared them the pain and anguish of watching their brother die? What kind of love is it that has the power to deliver from sickness and death but chooses not to? I will argue that it is precisely *because* he loved these people so much that he made the decisions that he did.

Look closely with me at vv. 5-6. Sadly, very few English translations are faithful to the original Greek text. Even the ESV falls short in the way it translates v. 6. Bear with me. This is not an exercise in irrelevant minutia of the Greek New Testament. What I'm about to show you is critically important for your life and your relationship to God.

We read in v. 5 that Jesus "loved Martha and her sister [Mary] and Lazarus." The ESV then translates v. 6 in this way: "So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." But v. 6 literally reads, "So, *therefore*, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, . . ." As I said, most English translations fail to use the word "therefore," and I think you can understand why. It simply makes no sense to most people to say that Jesus *loved* Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and *therefore* he chose not to make the journey to Bethany to heal him. *If he loved them, why would he delay his trip?*

Jesus appears calloused and uncaring. After all, he could have healed Lazarus without ever making the trip. We saw him heal a young boy in John 4:46-50 from a great distance. But he chose not to heal Lazarus. He chose not to alleviate the anguish and emotional turmoil and devastation in the hearts of Mary and Martha. Why? Because he loved them! That's right, it was because he loved them. I know that sounds like a contradiction. But he loved them and therefore chose not to make the journey in time to deliver Lazarus from death. He could have dropped everything at hand and hurried off to Bethany. But he didn't. Why?

As if to make matters even worse, we read in v. 15 that Jesus was "*glad*" that he was not present to prevent Lazarus from dying. His delay wasn't because he enjoyed their grief. Jesus wasn't a sadist by any stretch of the imagination. So ask yourself this question: "Which is the greater miracle: healing a sick man or raising a dead one? Which miracle will more effectively increase faith: healing Lazarus of an illness or raising him from the grave? Which miracle will better serve to identify Jesus as the resurrection and the life, the one through whom eternal life beyond the grave is available?"

My point is that Jesus saw in Lazarus's illness two opportunities providentially orchestrated by the Father: (1) the opportunity to glorify the Father (v. 4), and (2) the opportunity to increase and deepen the faith of his followers and their confident, joyful satisfaction in all that God is for them in Jesus.

We will never understand this until we come to realize that "love" for Jesus was something entirely different from what "love" meant to people in his day and even in our day as well. For virtually all other people, love means

I will always do everything I can to deliver you immediately and completely from all suffering;
I will always do everything I can to make you feel good about yourself;
I will always do everything I can to affirm what you believe to be true about yourself and the lifestyle you have chosen to pursue;
I will always do everything I can to enable you to flourish physically, financially, and in every other way.

But that isn't how Jesus loved people. And I hope it isn't the way you and I do. How many times have you been with someone who is suffering or facing challenging circumstances and they say to you: "Well, if Jesus loved me, he wouldn't let me suffer like this. I simply can't bring myself to believe that he really cares; if he did, he would do something about my trials and troubles."

In point of fact, the way Jesus loves you and me is by doing whatever it takes to enable us to see the beauty and all-satisfying glory of God. Jesus is far more concerned with the depth of our faith and the clarity with which we see and enjoy God than he is with our deliverance from suffering. That doesn't mean Jesus doesn't ever deliver us or heal us or provide solutions to challenging problems. Of course he does. But even when he does, the aim is so that we might be enthralled and captivated by the majesty and splendor of who God is. I know this sounds odd to many of you. And I can assure you that it will always seem odd and topsy-turvy until such time as the Holy Spirit opens your eyes.

Affirming someone in the sort of sinful behavior that puts their soul in jeopardy of eternal condemnation is not love. Love is doing and saying whatever is needed in order to reveal to someone the glory, beauty, and all-satisfying majesty of God in Jesus. Love is doing and saying whatever is needed to enable a person to know God and enjoy God and spend an eternity in the unimaginable delight of beholding his beauty.

You and I often struggle to see this because we are man-centered, human-centered, rather than God-centered. To be God-centered is to see God as revealed in Christ Jesus as the greatest and most satisfying treasure in the universe. And to help someone else see and experience that treasure is the greatest expression of love you can display. You know God loves you when he does whatever is needed to open your eyes and heart to see and savor more of him, more of his beauty, more of his all-satisfying majesty. That's why the very intentional delay of Jesus in going to Bethany was an act of love. It provided an opportunity for all concerned to see more of God's glory and power at work!

I know how odd this sounds to many of you. You were born upside down when it comes to understanding what love is. You were born with yourself at the center. And God is doing all he can to set you right side up again by placing himself at the center. And that is how he loves us!

So let me say it again. Love isn't always the immediate removal of pain or the immediate relief from emotional distress or deliverance from death itself. I love the way someone else put it: "If you walk through life thinking that minimizing pain is the essence of love, the Bible will be a closed book to you" (John Piper).

Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus and therefore permitted them to suffer in a way that the world would insist was unloving. But his desire for each of them was to see and savor and be satisfied with the majestic glory and power of God. And that is what it means to say he loved them!

Those four days between Lazarus's death and resurrection must have been sheer torture for Mary and Martha. They couldn't see anything of the glory of God during those four days. And many of you are living in your own "four days" of anguish that you are persuaded will never end. For you it may be four years, or forty years, or a virtual lifetime. And how is God glorified in your circumstances? He is glorified when you trust him above good health and you treasure him more than earthly finances and you find satisfaction in him instead of in illicit sex and worldly ambition. ***Don't measure God's love for you by how much you've got stashed away in the bank or invested in the market or how healthy and popular you are. Measure how much God loves you by how much of himself he reveals to you and how much of himself he gives you to enjoy and be truly satisfied.***

We can see how much Jesus really loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus by looking more closely at the story. We read in v. 6 that when he received news of the illness of Lazarus "he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:6). It would have taken one day for the messenger sent by Mary and Martha to arrive. Jesus then waited two days. Finally, it would have again taken one day for Jesus and his disciples to travel to Bethany. Thus we read in v. 17 that when Jesus finally arrived "he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days."

There may well have been significance in his decision to delay his arrival until four days had passed. Many rabbis in the first century believed that the soul of an individual hovered over the body for the first three days following death, hoping to re-enter it. However, once a person's soul sees that decomposition has set in, usually by the third day, it departs, a signal that the death is final and irreversible.

I'm not suggesting that Jesus believed this or that he was endorsing others in their belief, but he may have taken advantage of the people's belief in this idea in order to heighten the miraculous nature of what he was about to do. By waiting until the fourth day, Jesus eliminated any possibility of someone arguing that Lazarus wasn't really dead and that he only experienced a resuscitation and not a resurrection.

Perhaps you will respond by saying that it's not all that bad because Jesus knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. All I can say is that if you think this way it's probably because you haven't been around much death. I have. And it isn't pretty! There were few medical remedies available that might alleviate pain. There was no hospice in the first century. Dying was incredibly stressful and painful with little relief for the individual. And don't forget that Mary and Martha didn't know that Jesus was going to raise him from the dead. Their grief was intense and quite real, and Jesus chose not to intervene and protect them from feeling the indescribable distress of losing their brother.

Why? Because he had something for them that was far greater than emotional relief and comfort, namely, a vision and experience of the glory of God!

We are looking at this story primarily for what it shows us concerning Jesus. Thus far we have seen that Jesus was someone who looked at everything, both in life and in death, in terms of its potential to glorify the Father. And we have seen that Jesus was a lover, but that he loved his friends and he loves us for reasons entirely different from what we might expect. And now for the third truth about Jesus.

Third, Jesus was fully human!

We see the genuine humanity of Jesus in the fact that he really “loved” Lazarus and his two sisters (v. 3). We see other emotional responses by Jesus. We read this in vv. 33, 35, and 38 –

“When Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled” (John 11:33).

“Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

“Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb” (John 11:38).

Jewish custom required that even a poor family had to hire at least two people to play the flute and one woman to wail at a funeral. So, Jesus comes into the presence of what one commentator has referred to as “professional grief” (Carson, 415). His weeping is possibly due to his knowledge that his friend was wrapped in cloths and lying lifeless in a tomb. Even the people present interpreted his tears as a sign of his love for Lazarus. On the other hand, why would he weep for Lazarus if he knew he was about to raise him from the dead?

However, others complain: “Where were you when we needed you?” And Jesus’s response this time is not words, but strong, almost visceral emotion. There are two words at the end of verse 33 that describe his response: “He was *deeply moved* in his spirit and *greatly troubled*” (v. 33). The word translated “deeply moved” is used again in v. 38. This word is never used to describe the experience of compassion or sorrow. It is the same word John uses in 12:27 and 13:21 and in John 14:1 where Jesus tells his disciples, “Let not your hearts be *troubled*.” These words indicate that Jesus was upset and angry. But at what?

Some say he was disturbed that his motives for delaying his arrival in Bethany were being questioned. Notice that the second time Jesus is described as being “deeply moved” it comes immediately after some of them had said, in v. 37, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” Once again our English translations let us down. John 11:38 opens with the word, “Therefore.” Perhaps it was because they questioned his sincerity and love for the family that he is “deeply moved again.”

Others contend that he is angry at sin, sickness, and death that bring so much pain into the world. Or perhaps he was disturbed that people like Mary and Martha were grieving like pagans, like “others do who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Jesus understands grief, but not grief that is borne of despair or that forgets the promise of resurrection.

We may never know the full extent of the reasons that stirred Jesus to react this way. But this leads directly into the fourth truth about Jesus that we find in this story.

Fourth, Jesus was not only fully human but also fully God!

We see this in several places. Let’s first look at his dialogue with Martha in vv. 20-27. Jesus assures her that Lazarus “will rise again” (v. 23b). Yes, she says, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (v. 24). To which Jesus responds by declaring: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die [physically, like your brother Lazarus], yet shall he live” (v. 25).

Notice what Jesus doesn’t say. He *doesn’t* say, “*There is a resurrection and there is life.*” Jesus isn’t making a doctrinal declaration. He is making a personal claim. He makes it clear to her: “Martha, resurrection isn’t just something out

there for which you are waiting. It is right here, standing in front of you. It's me! I am the resurrection and the life. There is no resurrection apart from me. There is no life outside of me."

Jesus moves from an abstract statement about life after death to a personal claim: "I am the only one who can raise the dead. I am the only one in whom real and eternal life is found." He wants the focus of Martha's faith (and yours as well) to be not in a principle but in a person: in Jesus! "Yes," says Jesus, "there will be a final resurrection and eternal life to follow but only because **I** will conquer death and **I** will be raised and **I** have the power and authority to bestow eternal life on all who believe in **me!**" Only God can make a claim like that. Jesus doesn't have to say, "I am God." All he has to do is to claim to do what everyone knows only God can do.

Jesus then puts her on the spot. And yes, he's putting all of us on the spot as well: "Do **you** believe this?" Not others. You! He doesn't say, "What does Mary think?" He doesn't ask her what the news media are saying! Don't turn and ask the person sitting next to you. Ask yourself: "Do **I** believe this?" Well, do you?

What is "this" that he is asking her to believe? He isn't asking Martha if she believes he is about to raise her brother from the dead. He is asking her to go beyond her belief that Lazarus will be raised on the final day. He is asking her directly and personally: "Do you trust me when I say that I am the resurrection and I am the life?" And she knows what this entails. To say Yes to his question means that she believes he is "the Christ, the Son of God" who has come into the world to save sinners like her and like you and me.

Make no mistake: whether or not you believe "this" to be true about Jesus has no effect whatsoever on whether or not it is true. Jesus **IS** the only one in whom resurrection and eternal life can be found. Your choice not to believe it doesn't make it false. The reality of resurrection is not created or destroyed by your belief or disbelief. All will die and all will be raised. Jesus said it clearly back in John 5,

"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29).

There is also evidence of the deity of Jesus in the mere fact that he raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). The way Jesus prays indicates he had already asked his Father for Lazarus's life. All he needed to do now is thank the Father for saying Yes.

This is actually more a proclamation than a prayer, but it is a proclamation that came out of his prior request that the Father raise Lazarus from the dead. He spoke it aloud so that everyone present may know and "believe that you sent me" (v. 42). Literally, he cries out aloud: "**Lazarus! Here! Outside!**" Suddenly, all bodily processes that had ceased are instantly restored to their former state. The decay and stench of decomposition disappears. His body and spirit are reunited.

Nothing is said about what Lazarus experienced during the four days of physical death. But Scripture elsewhere teaches that he would have been in the presence of God in heaven. I can only speculate, but I can't help but wonder if, when God told Lazarus what was about to happen, he said, "Oh, darn it! Do I have to go back?"

In any case, Lazarus's feet would have been bound at the ankles, his arms tied to his body with linen straps, and his jaw held shut by a strip of cloth tied around the top of his head and underneath his chin. I suspect that he came out of the tomb hopping or at most shuffling!

Much has been made of the fact that Jesus specified the name Lazarus, lest everyone in the graves all rose up alive. I appreciate the sentiment, but we must remember that Lazarus was a common name, yet only one Lazarus emerged from the tombs. Jesus had one and only one Lazarus in mind. Even if he hadn't spoken his name, Lazarus alone would have come forth.

What this story tells us about human beings

We are now prepared to look at something this story tells us about human beings, about human nature, about the depravity of the human heart. We are told in v. 45 that "many of the Jews . . . who had come with Mary and had seen

what he did, believed in him.” Praise God. But there was yet another response on the part of many. We see it in several places.

First, we read in v. 46 that some immediately run off and tattle on Jesus to the Pharisees. The Pharisees gather together to try to figure out what to do. It seems obvious to us what they should do: bow before Jesus and put your trust in him as the promised Messiah, the one who raises people from the dead! But no, they can’t allow him to go around raising people from the dead! “Everyone will believe in him” (v. 48a) and if they do they won’t follow us any longer. We’ll lose our popular support. Worse still, “the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (v. 48b). In other words, they are terrified that if they acknowledge what Jesus has done the Romans will take the Temple from them and perhaps even destroy the entire Jewish nation.

They couldn’t care less about a man being raised from the dead! They have seen for themselves undeniable proof of the supernatural, divine power of Jesus. But they don’t care. They only care about protecting their reputation, their property, their status, and their personal comfort. Such is the depth of human depravity apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit! It’s quite simply astounding to ponder.

Second, look at vv. 55-57. While in Jerusalem for Passover they stand in the temple looking for Jesus. But they look for him not to follow him or to praise him. No. According to v. 57, “the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, *so that they might arrest him.*” They remain rigidly and defiantly opposed to Jesus, wishing only to rid themselves of him lest he threaten their status in the community.

Both of these incidents tell us once again that not everyone will respond positively to a miracle. We tend to think that if God would only perform a supernatural sign in the presence of our unbelieving friends and family they would turn from their sin and trust Jesus for salvation. Some certainly would. Some did who witnessed the healing of the man born blind. Some did who then watched Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. But many were so entrenched in spiritual blindness and self-centeredness that not all the miracles in the world could pierce their calloused hearts.

Third, there is one more text that reveals much about human sin and spiritual blindness. It is found in John 12:9-11. There we are told that whereas many came to the temple in Jerusalem to see both Jesus and Lazarus, the “chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well” as Jesus. They were determined to do this because “many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus” (v. 11).

Amazing! Think of it. Here is Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead. And here is Lazarus, undeniably once dead and now alive, standing in their presence. And their response is to say: “Let’s kill them both! We can’t have tangible evidence of this undeniable miracle walking around. We’ll lose our following among the people. They will run off after Jesus if we don’t intervene and kill them both!”

Conclusion

Let’s conclude with three simple reminders.

First, don’t ever think that because you haven’t been healed or delivered from your trials at the time you think it should happen that Jesus doesn’t love you. Sometimes it’s precisely because he loves you that he delays showing up. It’s not because he is insensitive to your pain. His purpose may be to help you learn to rest satisfied in God’s grace and beauty and glory and that your faith not always be dependent on comfort.

Second, my hope is that we all would be able to see in our trials opportunities for God’s glory to be displayed. Yes, I know it’s hard. It doesn’t come naturally to us. It wasn’t easy for Mary and Martha, but they never lost confidence that Jesus ultimately had all their best interests at heart, even when he declined to show up when they thought they needed him most.

Third, nothing in this story should ever diminish your zeal to see God work a miracle, be it a healing, or supernatural financial provision, or even a resurrection from the dead. Yes, Lord, please do it again in our day, in our lives. And yes, I will continue to pray for a resurrection when I encounter death. Jesus loved to interrupt funerals then, and I pray he would do it yet again in our day.