

Lent 5A 2023

We tend to sanitize Jesus' message, to present the Disney version of the gospel in which there is no internal conflict, no sadness, no anger, only perfect peace and harmony.

Such equanimity is, however, the goal of Buddhists, not Christians.

Knowing that we are doing the right thing gives us peace in our hearts, but that is not incommensurable with frustration, anger, sadness.

Martyrs went to their deaths with peace in their hearts, but their hearts were also heavy with sadness for the ignorance of those around them, of those who do not comprehend the way of love.

Love can cause us to feel a rich variety of emotions.

These emotions have been created for us by God so that we might process and engage honestly with the world.

Perhaps nowhere in the gospel is this more obvious than in the death of Lazarus.

(Before we dive into this passage, as an aside, I want to point out that, once again,

Jesus speaks to his disciples metaphorically, and they take it literally.

Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep, so they assume he will be all right.

When he realizes that they do not understand, and tells them bluntly, “Lazarus is dead.”

Jesus clearly prefers metaphorical to literal language because it is much richer.)

Back to the topic of the day.

In this passage, we see that Jesus’ love of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was not just some idealized Christian love, some intellectual position with respect to others about their equal value without any emotional repercussions.

Jesus does not float above reality, but enters it fully.

Martha and Mary, aware of Jesus’ friendship with the three of them, send him a message when they are burdened: “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.”

This is not some generalized feeling that Jesus has for everyone.

Lazarus is “the one whom Jesus loves” in a very particular sense.

Love is different for each person because each person is different, each relationship is unique.

To make it even clearer, John tells us plainly that Jesus “loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”

They are special to him as individuals, and we can imagine that he is special to them.

All the more reason that Mary and Martha feel great disappointment and even some anger when Jesus does not rush to Lazarus' aid.

When he does show up, Mary, in particular, has harsh words for him, which is not apparent in our translation.

She essentially says to Jesus, "If you had been here, WHICH YOU WERE NOT, my brother would not have died."¹

Her words emphasize the effect of Jesus' absence and her consequent frustration.

Jesus is also not without emotion.

Our translation says that he was "greatly disturbed," but the Greek word used implies that he was so upset that he lost control of his breathing.

As one commentator, Rob Myallis, puts it, he "does the uncool thing of [losing] control of his emotions."²

Our culture equates emotional control with maturity.

We teach our children not to cry, especially in public.

We are never to be visibly vulnerable, yet Jesus was.

The passage translated "Jesus began to weep," Myallis continues, is literally "*The* Jesus wept," and, since Jesus means "God saves," it means, ³"The God who saves wept."

1 Rob Myallis, "John 11:1-45, *Lectionary Greek*, Blogspot.com, <https://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/>.

2 Rob Myallis, "John 11:1-45, *Lectionary Greek*, Blogspot.com, <https://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/>.

3 Rob Myallis, "John 11:1-45, *Lectionary Greek*, Blogspot.com, <https://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/>.

The God who saves wept.

And we apologize for crying.

Well, if its good enough for God . . .

When they go to the tomb and finally *unbind* Lazarus, the word used means “to set free,” and the form of the verb used is a plural command.

It is the community’s work, Myallis points out, to set Lazarus free.

It is our shared labor to free one another by building honest relationships with reasonable expectations.

We necessarily experience various emotions and face various disagreements.

We work through it, and this leads to a kind of freedom.

In other words, we are free from guilt about feeling our feelings, free from frustration because not everything goes smoothly, free from anxiety because we realize we do not have to create a Disney world without friction.

We punish ourselves when we seek perfection in ourselves, in others, or in a community.

We do not need perfection.

We need God.

Jesus showed us what honesty, dedication, and compassion looked like.

It was sometimes messy, and involved the full range of emotions created by God.

We are not to avoid those emotions, but are to use them in ways that build up one another, as Jesus always seeks to do.

Jesus says to his disciples, for example, “For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”

Later, he says to God, “I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

He is fully himself, but also takes into account how his behavior might affect the spiritual development of those around him.

The result was that he ended up where he should be, in the company of friends spreading the gospel.

One can do no better than to be fully oneself, and to direct that energy towards setting one other free to grow, to love, to be ourselves.

This is salvation, and not some metaphysical economic exchange, a cosmic price paid by Jesus’ suffering and death that led Mel Gibson to assume that the more Jesus suffered, the greater the effect, as if more suffering equals more salvation.

Jesus was the last offering in the sense that he was to be the last scapegoat.

It is our job to make that a reality by following his teachings and not scapegoating others, but lifting them up.

It is not too late to give up perfectionism or scapegoating or impassivity or misguided theology for Lent.

We are to live with gusto, with joy, with sincerity, with compassion.