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Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church  
John 11: 17-44  
March 6, 2022

“The Wholehearted Jesus: Jesus Had Friends You Know”

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. If there is any doubt about Jesus’ wholeheartedness, that Jesus is “all in” in every way for the cause of salvation of the world, let us observe with diligence, energy, compassion, and love the season that leads us to the day when Jesus laid down his life for us.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he answered, love God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. Then, he added a second, love your neighbors as yourself.

**With all your heart-** are we wholehearted in our faith? Or do we spend a lot of life’s journey being half-hearted. As we seek to draw closer to a Jesus who was wholehearted in every effort to bring God to this world, maybe our Lenten examination can be about our own wholeheartedness; when it comes to living our faith, are we “all-in” or not?

To conclude our service this morning, we will be singing a hymn familiar to many of us, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus!” It was written by a son to comfort his mother whom he had left behind in Ireland when he came to the United States. Though he could not be with his mother, he wanted to assure her that Jesus was with her, a friend like no other:

- Bearing our griefs and our sins
- Being Faithful in sharing our sorrows
  - Providing refuge
- Taking and shielding us in his arms

Many have written about what it means to have Jesus as a friend.

Author, Anne Lamott writes, “Jesus is the cleft in the rock, my safest friend, totally loving and accepting.

Pope Benedict wrote, “In Jesus, God took a human face and became our dearest friend and brother.

Evangelist and pastor, Joseph Prince writes, Even when you have failed, Jesus is right there with you, ready to pick you up and restore you to wholeness. Jesus is the most faithful, dependable, and trustworthy friend.

Contemporary Christian music composer, Michael Card writes when Jesus is your friend you will never be excluded by your failures and shortcomings. In this friendship, you can be certain there is someone who understands your fragileness, your struggles, your hurts.

At every turn, it sounds like the good news is that Jesus is “all in,” wholehearted in being our friend.

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But you can't do friendship by yourself. Even Jesus can't do friendship alone. It's not the nature of friendship.

The Book of Exodus says, “The Lord speaks to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend.” Isaiah writes that God addressed Abraham as “My friend.” Jesus told the disciples that you are my friends when do what I have commanded, love one another.”

How familiar we are with the love of God, the mercy of God, the judgment of God, but the friendship of God?

It can't be something God does alone. It's something God and Moses do together, Jesus and the disciples do together.

There was a cherished friendship among the adults, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus. Jesus does not expect these friends to relate to him as passive, obedient children, submissive and subservient. They weren't afraid or intimidated by Jesus. They trusted their friendship to the point that both Martha and Mary could come and grab Jesus by the lapels and ask, “Where have you been? If you had been here Lazarus would not have died.”

They were not accepting what had happened and they were holding Jesus accountable as friends do.

The large theological themes in the story of the raising of Lazarus has to do with Jesus' identity as the resurrection and the life, and the release of Lazarus from the bonds, imprisonment and constraining holds of death. Jesus is not going to raise all our dead loved ones back to life here on earth, but the powers of death does not hold us for eternity. It's the loving power of resurrection and life that holds us for eternity.

These theological themes are complex and it's why we always find ourselves with the crowds standing at the tomb observing Lazarus released from the bonds of death.

But It always bothers me that we whiz through verses 33-35. But not today!

When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

Jesus wept.

“Oh” they paused “See how he loved Lazarus,” they said.

Don’t we need to pause there for a moment.

When I was in my junior high Sunday School class, we played a game called, “Bible Baseball.” We were divided into teams. We would choose questions from a basket and depending on the difficulty of the question, we would move around the bases, and with the very difficult questions, we might hit a homerun. The team with the most runs at the end of the game got donuts. I was the first up at bat at the top of the inning. The question, “What is the shortest verse in the Bible?” was worth 3 bases. “Jesus wept.” I shouted. “Correct,” said my teacher, and moved our little stick figure to third base. “Yes!” I thought! “Score.... Go team.”

It never hit me until many years later that Jesus was crying. Don’t we need to stop there for a moment with the deeply troubled, disturbed, crying Jesus?

What kind of a friend are we for Jesus?

Maybe Mary and Martha spent some time with their friend at that moment. Scriptures don’t say that, only that they were anxious to get to the tomb as Lazarus had been dead four days. In this story, we are all anxious to get to the tomb, and have Lazarus walk out.

But as Lazarus walks out and is unbound from the chains of death, I always find myself feeling like we just expected Jesus to be there for Lazarus and his grieving family and friends.

But according to the way John tells the story, no one was present for Jesus in the only passage in John’s Gospel which ascribes intense emotions to Jesus. Maybe, it wasn’t thematically significant enough for John to address the fact that Jesus had these emotions in light of the importance of the resurrection message.

And we do tend to think that as God Incarnate, Jesus can probably take care of himself and get through these intense feelings.

But we have such expectation when it comes to Jesus being our friend, and perhaps halfhearted expectations of ourselves when it comes to being Jesus’ friend.

What was going on with Jesus in these verses?

The pain of death brings tears. Who cannot identify with that? Martha and Mary needed consoling. Jesus sees Mary weeping and the others surrounding her weeping and cannot contain his own tears, nor should he need to contain them. The pain of death in human life brings tears and the bitterness of physical death does not need to be minimized. Jesus has also lost a friend whom he loved, and he wept. It manifests for us the heart of God. God know what grief feels like to its core.

But why the agitation? Why was Jesus greatly disturbed? It has been a long and hard struggle among Biblical scholars as to how to interpret these emotions of Jesus because the Greek words connote great intensity with regards to feeling troubled, agitated, and even angry. Many of our English translations have sentimentalized these emotions, watered them down.

It brings me great satisfaction knowing that biblical scholars are stopping at these verses, and that there is this ongoing attention to what Jesus, our friend was going through.

Much of the consensus and thinking is that Jesus did not want this event to be so public. Maybe he was angry that the raising of Lazarus had to be so publicly shared. It was no longer a family matter among close, trusted friends who knew Jesus, had been with him, and as Martha said, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. God will give you what you ask of him."

Even those who considered Lazarus a good friend were not ready and would not at this moment grasp the meaning of Jesus as resurrection and life. There wasn't trusted friendship among them. They were not going to understand Jesus words or that this very scene foretold of another death where there would be a tomb, a stone, grave clothes, weeping, and a loud cry.

The fact that this was so public, and word got back to the religious leaders led to the consensus among them that Jesus was a threat to the stability of their nation under the Roman empire. He would have to die.

Who was there for Jesus through all this and who would be there for Jesus, this wholehearted Savior, in the events yet to come?

Where are his friends?

If friendship cannot be done alone, then what does it mean to be a friend to Jesus. We are so quick to claim the gift of Jesus' friendship for us, a friend who is "all in," a friend that we can embrace as the resurrection and life in all daily moments of our human existence, a friend who claims that even death doesn't have the power to remove us from that friendship.

But the nature of friendship is that it's not done alone, so what kind of friends are we in this relationship; halfhearted or wholehearted?

The Rev. Chuck Queen, pastor of the Immanuel Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky writes: "Maybe friendship with Jesus is a relationship we have to grow into; a stage of discipleship, a relationship that must be cultivated and nurtured throughout time as Mary, Martha and Lazarus spent time with Jesus just in friendship.

Johnson Oatman was a hymn writer most famous for, 'Count Your Blessings, Name them one by one.' Back in 1922, he wrote a jazzy tune called, "**I'll Be A Friend To Jesus**"

The words are:

They tried my Lord and Master,  
There was no one there to defend  
Within the halls of Pilate,  
Jesus stood..... without a friend.  
I'll be a friend to Jesus,  
My life for him I'll spend,  
And while on earth I am living,  
Lord, you shall have a friend.

Rev. Queen goes on to write:

To be a friend to Jesus is to share the intimate knowledge of God's love and passion for the world. It's to share the work of what God is doing and how God is doing it. The fruit of friendship with Jesus Christ consists of acts of peacemaking, works of forgiveness and reconciliation, restorative justice, and deeds of healing and compassion. That's how we can be a friend to Jesus. "I call you my friends, if you do what I have commanded you."

We can sing with great assurance and confidence, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" because we do- a wholehearted friend. One who is "all-in."

But perhaps there's another hymn that needs to be written,

"What Kind of A Friend Does Jesus Have in Me?"

Anyone up for writing that one?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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