

Sermon 09-14-2025
 “Friendship through Thick and Thin” – Rev. Markus Wegenast
 John 11:1-6 & 32-37

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,^[a] “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus^[b] was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

1)

The 10 commandments are a beautiful standard for living a good life. Even though they are deep in the Old Testament they give guidance to the very thing that Jesus was talking about: “Love the Lord your God” the first 3 (4) commandments, and “love your neighbor,” the remaining 7/6 commandments. Do you by any chance remember the last of the 10? It has to do with jealousy.

“Do not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” – Exodus 20: 17

I don’t want to come across like a big show off but I’m doing pretty good with not coveting my neighbor’s ox and donkey – really, not once in my life!

I don’t mean to be disrespectful of the 10th commandment – I hope we realize that there is deep meaning to this commandment for all people of all time periods and all cultural settings (e.g. think of envy related to today’s housing market, or cars etc.).

Do you think this commandment also includes being covetous of a neighbor’s friends?

Have you ever been jealous of the friendships that some of your neighbors have?

Admitting that we covet something is a deeply personal matter. It takes some guts to do this kind of soul searching. I want to encourage you – do it! Be honest with yourself and be honest with God - see how God will use your honesty for something good.

I’m asking the question about your jealousy factor regarding friendships because this is something that could easily happen when you reflect about today’s gospel passage.

Jesus was friends with Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary. It was a very significant friendship that gets mentioned several times in the New Testament. This is how it was mentioned in today's scripture passage:

“...Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus...” – John 11:5

Wow, the Lord of life, Jesus the Christ, God's son had a personal friendship with a family that was rooted in love. Of course, Jesus loved all people – even the one's he sharply criticized, but Lazarus, Martha and Mary are certainly singled out.

We don't know how their friendship started, what we do know is that Jesus spent time at their house on at least 3 occasions: the Mary/Martha story in Luke, this story, Mary anointing Jesus's feet 6 days prior to Passover, and he probably stayed at their house as a base camp during holy week.

What was it about them that our Lord singled them out as trusted, beloved friends? Do you think some people back in the days were jealous of them? Are you?!

Maybe it's a good thing to be a bit jealous of this friendship. I can't believe I just said that. But think about it, if it encourages us to desire to have the same friendship, isn't that a good thing? Isn't that what Jesus wants? He's not an exclusive friend, he wants you to be his friend too, he wants to be a regular guest at your house too (Revelation 3:20).

Isn't it a beautiful thought to have Jesus as a regular guest and friend (Dear Lord Jesus, come be our guest, and let this food to us be blessed...). I hope Jesus' friendship with Lazarus and his sisters encourages you to seek his friendship. Let's see what else we can discover from them...

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2)

Today's encounter of Jesus with his three friends is the most dramatic of all of them. Lazarus gets really, really sick. Martha and Mary know that their special friend Jesus is not very far away and is perfectly qualified to help their sick brother. He was currently at the southern part of the Jordan river (10: 40) – maybe about 10 miles away, so certainly a distance you can handle. They send someone to inform Jesus about Lazarus's sickness, probably running all those 10 miles to deliver the bad news. But when Jesus hears about what's going on in the house of his good friends his response is quite underwhelming:

...when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death... [; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.]”⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,⁶ after having heard that Lazarus^[b] was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was... - John 11:4-6

Hmm, how would you feel about that if you asked for a friend's help in a very serious matter?

Jesus is no ordinary friend. Lazarus, Martha and Mary knew this. There is no doubt they knew that Jesus is special, and they certainly knew he could do miracles through the power of God. But a tragedy happens. Lazarus's illness takes a turn for the worst, Lazarus dies, Jesus waited too long!

Oh, what pain. Not only did Lazarus die, Jesus was wrong! He said this illness was not going to lead to death and now it happened.

Can you imagine the world that just came crashing down on Martha and Mary? If Jesus wouldn't have procrastinated so long, he could have come and saved their brother. What was so important over there at the Jordan river that Jesus couldn't leave a bit earlier? He stayed there for two more days!!

By the time Jesus finally shows up in Bethany Lazarus has already been dead for 4 full days. They had the funeral, they had the burial, their brother now lies in his resting place in a big stone tomb with a mighty rock in front of it to seal the deal.

Mary does not hold back her emotions when Jesus arrives:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." - John 11:32

What do you hear in these words? Anger, frustration, deepest sadness and despair? Do you also hear some accusation? Mary's sister Martha said the same thing a few moments earlier (V21f).

It's an uncomfortable situation? Two grieving sisters confronting their good friend who is partially responsible for their brother's death!

Have you been in uncomfortable situations with friends? Have you been let down by a friend and confronted him/her about it?

Jesus was friends with Martha and Mary. Good friends can handle uncomfortable situations! Isn't that the mark of a true friendship – that you don't have to be all superficial and only try to go for the good times?

So what is Jesus going to do about it? What can we learn from him about handling uncomfortable situations with friends?

Jesus knew that he was about to do a spectacular miracle but before he performs his miracle he does something else:

He commits himself fully into the uncomfortable situation and is truly sympathetic. He goes into the pain that Mary and Martha have, he goes into it and he

shares it. Jesus' reaction to their grief, pain and frustration gives us the shortest sentence in the Bible:

Jesus began to weep. – John 11:35

In the Greek language in which the gospel of John was written these are just three words (edakrusen o iesous), some English translations give it in just two words – “he wept”.

Think about this for a moment. Why would Jesus weep? If he knew that this was not going to lead to death, if he truly knew that his heavenly father would have him bring Lazarus back from the dead, why cry?

Because that's what friends do!

True friendship goes through thick and thin, true friendship shares joy and it shares pain. True friendship is not afraid when things get rough.

We talked about this in our second sermon of this series when we discussed the story of Job who suffered so much and his three friends came and just sat with him for a week.

Scholars have put a lot of thought into Jesus' crying and some say he may have cried out of frustration about the lack of faith people had in his healing powers – but I think we need to acknowledge that the text is pretty honest in telling us how deeply troubled Jesus was - twice it mentions that Jesus was “greatly disturbed.”

Friends, I do believe in the sovereignty of Jesus, I have no problem whatsoever seeing the living God at work in Jesus Christ as the Bible tells us – but we do need to acknowledge that this true, living, and omnipotent God is also a God who shares our pain with us. God is not ignorant when people suffer – Jesus was not ignorant when he saw his friends in grief and when he saw the ugly tomb of his friend Lazarus. He cried honest tears because that sometimes is just the only thing you're able to do as a friend.

Yes, Jesus told Martha that he was going to do something big but that did not keep him from being raw in his own emotions when he was confronted with the power of death. He did not go up to that tomb of Lazarus saying: “Hey guys, look at me, you're never going to believe what I will do now...”

When Jesus stood in front of the tomb, realizing how the power of death is impacting the world he created, in that moment there were no words – there were only tears.

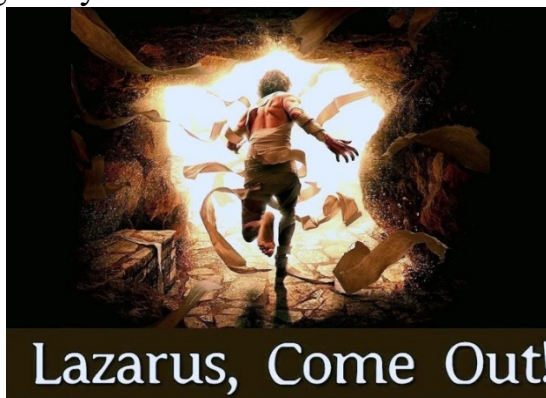
Are you able to do that with close friends in your life? It is one of those beautiful marks of true friendship when you can be with a friend in an uncomfortable situation and not say anything – just be and share the pain.

May we hear this truth again today...

3)

“Jesus wept” – it may be the shortest sentence in the Bible, but I could imagine it felt like an eternity. After this eternity, Jesus is ready to leap into action...

Jesus performs the biggest miracle of his ministry and brings his friend Lazarus back from the dead after being 4 days in the tomb. He shouts: “Lazarus, come out!”



How terrifying this must have been. But please don't imagine a Lazarus zombie image, because a zombie is not alive, Lazarus came back to live.

If Jesus showed us how a true friendship can handle uncomfortable situations, he now shows us what a true friendship with him is all about: It's about new life! It's about hope where there was none. It's about a complete turnaround from the norm!

When it comes to our friendships with Jesus this is something we are invited to embrace – when you're friends with Jesus dead ends are not final!

Let's be clear – none of us will soon have the opportunity to be a friend who brings another friend back from the dead. There is a difference between the friendship of Jesus when he walked the earth and our friendships today.

We are not Jesus who can bring our friends back to life. But we are following in his footsteps and can bring new life and new hope into seemingly hopeless situations. We do this by following the model of friendship shown to us through Jesus, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. When you're a friend through thick and thin, you bring a little bit of heaven into this earth, and this earth really needs it.

We started this sermon wondering about the 10th commandment and whether it prohibits us from feeling jealous for the amount of friends others have. It's easy to be jealous of Lazarus, Martha and Mary for their unique friendship with Jesus. But we all are offered this friendship. And we all are invited to experience the lifegiving power of our friend.

May you embrace your friendship with Jesus and may it empower you to be the best friend through thick and thin to others. Amen.