

## DEATH: TRANSITIONAL OR TERMINAL?

John 11: 17-44

It was a beautiful death... if you can call dying beautiful. A member of this congregation, Jetta, a woman who had been healthy enough well into her nineties, had a complication which required serious surgical intervention. She was given a choice. She chose to die in peace. I was there when she died. She was alert. We prayed. She prayed along with me the Lord's prayer. Others were there too. She was so grateful for all the kindness she had felt from so many. She went to sleep and never woke. Beautiful.

Then there was Jack, a long time elder in a former congregation of mine. Even though Jack had been a leader in the congregation, someone who engaged spiritual questions and also participated in study groups, he had a real humility when it came to thinking of himself as spiritual. He claimed he didn't understand much but was always interested to know more. His faith was a simple one, and even as he had questions, he was certain about the reality of God. God had been there for him throughout his life. He was grateful and blessed. He had asked in prayer many times and had always received an answer that helped him.

Now, Jack got cancer, and after a number of years of ups and downs, his cancer became untreatable. But Jack was ready. He was clear in his faith. He loved his family and the many friends and church folk that were part of his extended family. He had lived a good life and was ready to transition to the other side. Did he have doubts? No. He was given the gift of an assurance that was rooted deep in his soul. I received the call on a Friday night, just as we were having a family BBQ. I rushed to the hospital. Jack died within the hour. Once again, because he was so grateful and ready, it helped his dear spouse and family also move through his death with acceptance and peace. He had lived a good life and had given much to many. They and we all were grateful.

But then there was Jenny. Jenny had a difficult death, and it wasn't difficult for the reasons many deaths are. Jenny was in her senior years. And even though she had been sick for a while, she was not in pain. And if anyone should have died with a deep faith in God and peace in her heart it was her. She had been a pastoral care giver for our congregation, someone truly gifted and someone many held up as one of the most caring people they knew. Jenny was loving, tender and a wonderful listener. She was not uncomfortable in the presence of anger or despair in those who shared themselves with her. She would listen and offer guidance when trust was established and people came to trust her deeply. She was also spiritual and deeply literate in the scriptures.

And yet, when her time was approaching, Jenny became angry and bitter. Old memories and grievances emerged and she was not at peace. Her faith seemed to wane, and even with lots of prayer and reflection on the scriptures we engaged in together, I felt helpless, as did many others who came to offer themselves any which way they could. Her funeral was an honest sharing of the beautiful soul she was, but also, the anguish we all felt in her difficult death.

And let me share one more kind of difficult dying, and I do so with a trigger warning – the death of a child and the death of one's own child. Can anything be worse? I can't think so. I remember when my brother's and sister-in-law's infant child – Rachel, died. We knew there were certain complications with her heart before she was born, but the doctors were confident they could be managed with some surgery. We spent time at the hospital on vigil. We held an anointing with oil healing service and the hospital staff were welcoming and supportive of this. The surgery happened, and even as the surgery was a success, something went wrong after the surgery and Rachel's heart stopped. I have never seen my family members so emotionally broken as when Rachel died. We were all-together in a room at the hospital with a dead child totally overwhelmed with uncontrollable grief. I know some of you here and some of you taking in the service know such grief too...

So why am I bringing all this up? Because our theme today is death. Why? Because death is a part of life and a part of all our lives, like it or not. And as much as we may want to avoid it and think of other things, the more we allow it to have its place, the more it may teach us how to live life better than we sometimes do.

But how may we think of death and live through it? Our gospel reading offers us some rich revelatory wisdom. Jesus has been told that his good friend Lazarus is close to death. Sisters Mary and Martha have sent word to Jesus to come quickly as the window of time for possible healing intervention is closing fast. But Jesus is delayed. Whatever the reason given, the sisters are very wounded by this delay. In fact, by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has already died, his body wrapped and buried. When Jesus arrives, both sisters confront him, and they confront him in different ways.

First, there is Martha. She says this: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But Martha, bless her soul, still has faith in Jesus. She also says this: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask..." Jesus replies with an incredible promise: "Your brother will rise again." Now Martha, like most Jews of her time, believes in the final resurrection of the dead in some future time. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" she says. But Jesus replies with a declaration that is among the most significant in all of scripture, a declaration I use at most every funeral service I conduct. He declares this: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." And then he asks Martha: "Do you believe this?"

Well, Martha doesn't quite know what to make of this declaration. It will all make sense when her brother is resurrected while still in this world. But at this point, all she can acknowledge is this: "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Ok, Martha, fine, that's great, but that's not what Jesus asked. He asked whether you believe not only that those who die will live again, but that everyone who lives in Jesus spiritually and believes in Jesus and the eternal life in him, will never die. In other words, death is no longer a terminal state awaiting some future resurrection in some unknown future time. No. Death is now become a transition, with life so strong that it continues in some way after death. Is this believable? Well, certainly Jetta and Jack believed this. But Jenny? I don't know. And Rachel? She was just a child. Who knows what was passing through her soul... It takes a lot to believe that Jesus is the incarnation of eternal and infinite love and living in him through faith will turn death from something terminal to more of a transition.

OK, but what if Martha and we have our doubts? Does that disqualify us? Does lack of sufficient faith in eternal love as revealed and embodied in Jesus make death into something terminal rather than a transition to new life? Or if I do believe in death as a transition because I believe in the eternal and infinite power of love coursing through my spirit and the spirit of my loved one, does such faith and hope in the power of love eliminate the grief and the tearing apart feeling of separation?

OK, there are several big questions here. How would Jesus answer them? Well, here we need to move from Martha to Mary. Like Martha, Mary confronts Jesus with the very same accusation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Wow! Just in case Jesus didn't feel the sting of being accused earlier, he gets it again. But this time, Jesus responds in a very different way. Whereas with Martha he makes some declaratory statement about how faith in the healing power of love in him can even raise the dead and make death a mere transition, with Mary he gets emotional, really emotional. In fact, the words used to describe Jesus' reaction are intense. It all happens to him as he sees Mary and others totally devastated and inconsolable in their grief. Jesus takes it all in and feels it all very personally. We're told that Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." He asks to see where Lazarus body has been placed. He sees and then he can't hold it together any longer. He breaks down, weeping uncontrollably.

So, why is Jesus so torn up if he knows what he is about to do? Why is he so emotionally upset and heart-broken if he knows that regardless of how much faith Martha, Mary and even dead Lazarus have in him, he will raise him up? Because Jesus, like all of us, is an embodied human creature. We are flesh and blood as much as we are spirit. As much as we may believe or want to believe that death is a mere transition, being separated physically from those we love and from life on earth as we know it is brutal and hard. The more we love, the more we are invested and the more life is rich, fulfilling and connected to the life of others, the tearing away

that happens with death cannot be passed over as if it's some passing thing. It hurts, it wounds and it creates a void in us no other person can fill.

Even the way Jesus raises Lazarus and brings him forth from the ground is emotion-filled. We're told Jesus cries out, and cries out so loud everyone can hear him, even from a distance. So, what's the message here? What revelatory claim are we being called to embrace with our hearts? Faith in the power of love to raise up new life in us again and again in this life and beyond, is the same faith in the power of love we must live as grief and heartbreak. We must trust the grief and let it flow through us. It must have its time and in time, it will shift from tears of sadness to tears of gratitude... at least if it is love we are still feeling and not other more complicated feelings. Love is about grief as much as it is also about ecstasy, joy, gratitude and celebration. And sometimes, oftentimes, grief is difficult, hard and overwhelming. It must have its time until we come to the other side. It can feel terminal, but if the love in us is strong, we will also transition through death to new life. Love will seed new pathways for us and those we love will always be with us in some way.

So then, Jesus shows us the way and he calls us to follow. As the incarnation of divine love, he calls us to believe in him, that he is the resurrection and the life, and like him we will rise up again. Death is not terminal. It is a transition. And yet, love is truly love in us if we feel the losses of those we love truly as losses. "O how he loved his friend" the people tell Mary when they see how intensely Jesus breaks down weeping. Grieving deeply and allowing grief to have its time is not an indication that we lack faith. It is not evidence that we do not believe in the resurrection. Grief is evidence that love is strong in us – love for the person and love for ourselves for how the losses and trauma of loss have affected us. God has made us this way. We must honour what is in us and this will then serve the resurrection of life we are called to live into, beginning now. What do you think?

PRAYER: You are the resurrection and the life dear Jesus... As we live in you and as you live in us with your Spirit-energy flowing through us, may faith and hope in the eternal power of your love rise up in us, so that the barrier of death between us and our loved ones becomes ever thinner... Amen.