

Glorifying God

Preached FCCW March 29, 2020

John 11:1-45

The messenger arrived where Jesus and his disciples were staying with the kind of news no one wants to receive. “Lord, the one whom you love is ill.” It was a simple statement of fact, but an unspoken hope hovered in the silence that followed. An expectation that Jesus, who had healed countless strangers, would surely rush to cure his good friend Lazarus.

Jesus, though, seemed remarkably nonchalant about his friend’s condition. 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.” Taken at face value, it sounds like a very self-serving way to look at Lazarus’ predicament. Like the way leaders sometimes politicize someone else’s tragedy to serve their own agendas.

Maybe that is the problem. We are used to interpreting a word like “glory” from a human point of view, where glory is always associated with shining a spotlight on someone who distinguished themselves by outperforming others, as if life was a kind of competition. Glory in that sense, comes by putting distance between ourselves and everyone else. Not the kind of social distancing that works for the benefit of all, but a distance that exalts a few to privileged status. For the one who is glorified by others, glory can be an addiction. The ego, once it has tasted the approval of others, is constantly on the prowl for more opportunities to satisfy that appetite.

This, by the way was not the first time that Jesus mentioned God’s glory in the same sentence as a tragedy. Once, his disciples pointed to a beggar who was born blind and asked Jesus whose fault it was; his own or his parent’s sins. Things like illness or disaster being attributed to immorality was a common assumption then; as it sometimes still is today. Jesus brushed aside that kind of thinking, saying that the man’s blindness was not a punishment, at all. But, Jesus said, it was an opportunity for God to be glorified.

When Jesus said that God would be glorified through Lazarus’ illness, or the beggar’s blindness, he was not saying that God capitalizes on tragedy in order to satisfy a God-sized ego or to put us in our place. The expression, “It’s God’s will” should never be a prefix for any disaster, including the pandemic we find ourselves mired in. God’s glory is made visible not by God distancing God’s self from humanity, but by God entering into humanity’s suffering. Which is what God did, when he took on mortal flesh, shared our humanity and waded into the messiness of this world in the person of Jesus Christ, who wept at the grave of Lazarus like any other mourner.

Which is to say that God's glory is most clearly identifiable in the person of Jesus. And the glory of Jesus was most visible when he was bringing compassion, healing and justice wherever human quests for glory had resulted in conflict, suffering and injustice. By the same token, God is glorified most in *us* when we are following the example that Jesus set for us. God is glorified in us when what we see in a disaster or tragedy is not an advantage but an opportunity.

Jesus once warned his disciples against performing good deeds for the wrong motives. If done to gather the approval of others, you may indeed get the reward you were seeking, but the reward turns out to be short lived. But when good deeds are done out of genuine compassion, the reward is not dependent on the approval or disapproval of anyone.

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead for a few days. Both of Lazarus' sisters—Martha and Mary—had the same thing to say about Jesus' late arrival. "If you had been here my brother would not have died." It was true. Jesus had healed many people. If he had gotten there sooner, he could have healed Lazarus. The sister's comment might've been more than a statement of fact, though. It might have also been an expression of disappointment. Maybe even, of resentment. Resentment at Jesus for being absent when they needed him most.

If there was a tone of judgment in the words, Jesus didn't react to it. He said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha thought he was reminding her of something she already believed to be true about the future, but which was little consolation in the midst of the grief she felt in the present moment. "I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

But Jesus wasn't satisfied with her believing in a promise of glory in some future by and by. He wanted her to have faith in resurrection as a present reality. He said, "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." Then he proved it by telling them to roll the stone away from the tomb where her brother was buried and calling out, "Lazarus, Come forth!" When Lazarus answered that command to "Come forth", stepping out from the tomb, the glory of God was revealed for all to see. Lazarus, who was indisputably dead, had been restored to life.

A second century Bishop by the name of Irenaeus is quoted as having said, "The glory of God is man fully alive." Think of that. God is glorified not by temples built to honor him, not by obedience born of fear, but by our living to the fullness of our promise and potential. The promise and potential that Jesus demonstrated for us all.

In a way, you and I—all of us—are Lazarus. Jesus has called you and me to a new life, just as surely as he summoned Lazarus to come out from the tomb. He calls us to a life of glorifying God. Starting now. If we want to see where God is being glorified during the worst of times, we should look where—in the midst of tragedy and suffering—we can see the love of Jesus being lived out in ordinary people.

Most of us are probably familiar with the Mr. Rogers quote: *When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."*

Thich Nhat Hanh once said, *"all that is beautiful contains suffering, and all suffering can bring forth great beauty."* In 1975, after the withdrawal of American forces, millions of desperate South Vietnamese tried to flee in small overcrowded boats. Many of these "boat people" found refuge in Europe or North America. Nobody knows how many never made it; their boats capsizing in storms of their lives lost in the attacks of pirates. It was a tragic exodus for many. But Hanh saw in the midst of the disaster that the difference between life and death for many often came down to the actions of a very few. He recorded how *"if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression – face, voice – communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many."*

One person—Jesus—has saved us all by calling us to new life. And millions upon millions of people since that time have glorified God following Jesus' example.

There has been talk about this pandemic being over and behind us in time for our celebration of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Maybe it will. Maybe it won't. Either way, we are called and empowered to live resurrection lives right now.

There is nothing about this pandemic that glorifies God. But, our responses to the pandemic can bring God glory, because when the response to any humanitarian disaster manifests itself in compassion, kindness and—where necessary—sacrifice, the glory of God is on full display.

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