

The Thorn of Loss
John 11:17-45
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
March 11, 2007
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A married couple went to the hospital to have their baby delivered. Upon their arrival, the doctor said he had invented a new machine that would transfer a portion of the mother's labor pain to the father. He asked if they were willing to try it out. They were both very much in favor of it.

The doctor set the pain transfer to 10% for starters, explaining that even 10% was probably more pain than the father had ever experienced before. But as the labor progressed, the husband felt fine and asked the doctor to go ahead and kick it up a notch. The doctor then adjusted the machine to 20% pain transfer. The husband was still feeling fine.

The doctor checked the husband's blood pressure and was amazed at how well he was doing. At this point they decided to try for 50%. The husband continued to feel quite well. Since the pain transfer was obviously helping out the wife considerably, the husband encouraged the doctor to transfer ALL the pain to him. The wife delivered a healthy baby with virtually no pain.

She and her husband were ecstatic. When they got home, the mailman was dead on the porch.

You would be right to think that a father can never know the pain of a mother in childbirth. Here's a question, though, can God know the pain of a person who suffers?

That is an extremely important question, because all of us suffer. Every one of us will experience the thorn of loss.

There is a wonderful legend of a servant who was in the marketplace in Baghdad one day trying to get supplies for his master, when he had the most frightful experience of his life. When he ran into his master's home a short time later the color had completely drained out of his face.

The master said, *What in the world is the matter with you?*

The servant said, *I just had the most frightful experience in my life. When I was in the marketplace getting supplies I looked up and I saw Death. And Death raised his hand. And I know he was trying to get me. Master, loan me your fastest horse so I can get away from Death and find someplace to hide.*

The master said, *Where are you going to go to hide from Death?*

The servant said, *I'm going to the town of Sumora. Surely Death won't find me there. If I leave now, I can get there by nightfall.*

So the master loaned him his fastest horse, and the servant galloped away to the town of Sumora.

The master then went to the marketplace to get his supplies, which the servant hadn't gotten. And when he was there, he saw Death, too. And so he said to Death, *Death, my servant said you just raised your hand against him. Why are you trying to do him harm?*

Death said, *I didn't mean him any harm at that particular moment. I raised my arm in surprise, Death said. I didn't expect to see him here. Because I have an appointment with him tonight in Sumora.*

That servant was about to figure out that no matter how fast the horse, or how far the journey, he could not escape his appointment with death.

No matter how good a person you are, no matter how much you love life, no matter how close of a relationship you have with Jesus—you and I, we can't escape death.

Death is all around us. You pay attention to happenings in Iraq, and certainly you know the reality of death.

But it's not just war. 140,000 people die every day in America. And what makes that more than just a statistic is the fact that sometimes the person who dies is our father, or our mother, or our spouse, or our brother or sister, or our child.

Jesus, also, experienced the thorn of loss.

Lazarus and Jesus were close.

Lazarus and his two sisters-- Mary and Martha-- lived in a suburb of Jerusalem called Bethany. According to John they were among the best friends Jesus had. He used to drop in on them whenever he was in the neighborhood.

You remember Mary, the impractical one who wasted that expensive perfume, pouring it all over Jesus when he last

visited them. Remember Martha, the practical one who was good in the kitchen.

When Jesus made his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday it was from Bethany that he took off. And it was also to Bethany that he went back to take it easy for a few days before his final arrest.

Well, Lazarus got sick, so his sisters-- Mary and Martha-- sent Jesus a message saying, *Your good friend Lazarus is real sick.*

You'd think Jesus would have hurried on over to Bethany, but he didn't. He said something like, *This illness doesn't lead to death. And he stayed where he was a couple more days. I don't know why. Then he told his disciples, Come on, let's go back to Bethany. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up.*

The disciples—proving again that they were the most literal-minded people in the history of the world—said, *Well, if he's fallen asleep, he'll get a good rest and wake up feeling fine.*

Jesus had to spell it out for them: *Lazarus is dead. And for your sakes I'm glad I wasn't there. Because you're about to be given more reasons to believe in me.*

They didn't really want to go back there. Jesus had enemies in that area—people who wanted him dead. They thought it was way too dangerous. Finally Thomas said, *Well let's go with him so we can all die together.*

By the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had already been dead for four days. Mary and Martha were still broken up about it.

They were mad at Jesus for not having come in time to save their brother. Then, in the next breath, they told him they knew Jesus could save him still.

Jesus said to Martha, *Your brother will be raised up.*

She said, *Yeah, yeah, I know, at the end of time he will be raised along with everyone else.* What Martha wants here is not some pious talk like

He's gone to a better place or

Martha, this is God's will or

God needed Lazarus in heaven more than we did.

She wants her brother back.

An unmarried woman, in that day, in that patriarchal society, what's going to become of her and her sister, alone, vulnerable, without their brother? Without Lazarus, Mary and Martha may be as good as dead.

But Jesus didn't come to talk abstract theology about the resurrection of the dead. He doesn't say, *Someday you'll see him again in heaven.*

He says, *You don't have to wait for the end. I am, right now, the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she might die, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this, Martha?*

Then Jesus went to the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it.

And when he saw the tomb where Lazarus was, "Jesus wept"—v. 35. John says Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

See how he loved him, the bystanders said.

I read once of a little girl who hurt her finger, and she ran to her daddy, who was a preacher, engaged in studying. She showed him her finger, but he was so caught up in his studies he just looked at it, and said, *OK, that will be all right,* and sent her on out.

She ran to her mother, weeping and crying, and her mother said, *Oh, dear, does it hurt that much?*

The little girl said, *No, mommy, it's just that daddy didn't even say, 'Oh.'* That is what she wanted, somebody to say "Oh" with her.

Amazingly, this is what God does with us. In Romans 12, Paul tells us to *weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice*, {cf, Rom 12:15}. Here Jesus sets the example of this. Knowing, I guess, that he is going to turn it all around, he even so feels the sorrow of their hearts and weeps.

God mourns with us when we encounter the thorn of loss and also enables us to show compassion to others in that experience.

Jesus told them to remove the stone. Martha said, *By this time there's a stench. He's been dead four days.*

Jesus looked her in the eye and said, *Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*

They removed the stone. Jesus raised his eyes up to heaven and prayed: *Father, I'm grateful you've listened to me. I know you always do listen, but on account of this crowd standing here I'm speaking out loud to you so that they might believe you sent me.*

And Jesus faced the tomb and called: *Lazarus, come out.*

And he came out, wrapped from head to toe, with a handkerchief over his face. Jesus told them, *Unwrap him and let him loose.*

When I was in high school I read a book called *Life After Life*, and it was about people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead. You've heard these stories. You see these people interviewed on TV every now and then.

Interviews with these people reveal that after the glimpse they evidently all of them get of a figure of light waiting for them on the other side of this dark tunnel, they are very reluctant to be brought back to this side.

On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes and saw the figure of Jesus standing there in the sunlit entrance of that tomb, offering his hand, he couldn't, I bet, for the life of him tell which side he was on.

[Frederick Buechner, "Lazarus" in Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, pp. 101-2]

But Lazarus did come out of the grave.

First Jesus commiserated with those experiencing the thorn of loss. He shared their pain and shared their tears. He cried with them. Jesus did not remove the thorn of loss. He transformed the loss.

God does not remove the thorn of loss from us just because we're Christians. I was at a Tennessee CBF meeting this weekend, and one person there was talking about her brother-in-law who recently died and left behind three kids ages 12, 10, and 8. Those kids are feeling the painful thorn of loss. No doubt about that. I would never be so glib as to say that God has removed the thorn of loss from that family. They will always know the pain of that loss.

Jesus does not remove the thorn of loss from us. Jesus himself experienced that thorn. Jesus wept. Two of the most important words in the Bible: Jesus wept. That means you can, too.

Jesus does not remove the thorn of loss, but he commiserates with us, and then he also *transforms* the thorn of loss. Jesus transforms the thorn of loss into something completely new and different.

Back in January at Gene Barnes's funeral, I shared some dialogue from Pearl S. Buck's novel, *The Big Wave* that illustrates how God transforms the thorn of death.

[thanks to Dr. James Hatley, former Pastor at Second for this illustration]

Pearl S. Buck gave us a lovely exchange between a little boy and his father. *What is death?* Kino asked.

Death is the great gateway, Kino's father said. His face was not at all sad; instead, it was quiet and happy.

The gateway—where? Kino asked again.

Kino's father smiled, Can you remember when you were born?

Kino shook his head. I was too small.

Kino's father laughed, I remember very well. Oh, how hard you thought it was to be born. You cried and you screamed.

Didn't I want to be born? Kino asked. This was very interesting to him.

You did not, his father told him, smiling. You wanted to stay just where you were in the warm, dark house of the unborn. But the time came to be born and the gate of life opened.

Did I know it was the gate of life? Kino asked.

You did not know anything about it and so you were afraid of it, his father replied. But see how foolish you were! Here we were waiting for you, your parents, already loving you and eager to welcome you. And you have been very happy, haven't you?

Until the big wave came, Kino replied. Now I am afraid again because of the death that the big wave brought.

You are only afraid because you do not know anything about death, the father replied. But some day you will wonder why

you were afraid, even as today you wonder why you feared to be born.

And so I said at Gene's funeral something like what I have said at others: The God who loved Gene so much and was willing to bring him to life out of birth is the same God who stands on the other side of the experience of death and says, *Come on. This is the gate of life.* Imagine God, waiting for Gene, already loving him and eager to welcome him.

All of this doesn't mean that loss doesn't hurt. It hurts. Jesus wept. But it also means in Christ the thorn of loss is transformed. In fact, even in death, life blossoms like a rose.

Crown of thorns... crown of glory.