

WORSHIPPING DEATH (John 11:1-45)

I've always felt sorry for Lazarus. He gets sick, really sick, and then he dies. That's a sad story. But it's hardly unique. Everybody dies. And life expectancy in the first century was a lot shorter than today. People died young. Average life expectancy at birth was only around 28 years, and if you survived childhood, your life expectancy went all the way up to 37 years. People could die at any age, just like Lazarus.

But Lazarus seems to be lucky. Jesus didn't get to his sickbed in time to heal him, which is a strange little twist, but Jesus does the next best thing: he brings Lazarus back to life. Lucky, lucky Lazarus. Or is he really so lucky? Just think about it for a minute.

In the UCC Book of Worship, one of the prayers to be used in a funeral service gives thanks "that for _____ all sickness and sorrow are ended, and that death itself is past." That's Lazarus. Sickness and sorrow are ended and death itself is past, thanks be to God – until Jesus shows up and calls him to come out of the tomb so he can do it all over again. Lazarus gets raised from the dead so he can die again a second time. I ask you: Is that a blessing or a curse?

In any case, that's why I've always felt a bit sorry for Lazarus. The story doesn't tell us how Lazarus actually felt about it, but I'm not sure it's something I would want for myself.

This is a strange story. And the strangest thing about it is why Jesus didn't come running when he got the message that Lazarus was sick. Martha and Mary obviously believe Jesus could have kept their brother from dying. And it doesn't say that Jesus was busy healing people who were sicker than Lazarus and couldn't get away. Why did he wait to go to Bethany?

Even though I feel a bit sorry for Lazarus, let's concede that today's reading ends on a happy note. Martha and Mary get their brother back, even if Lazarus has mixed feelings about it. And this miracle is a good evangelism tool that turn some doubters into believers.

But if we had read a little further, the aftermath is even stranger. After it says some believed, the very next verse says that some who saw what Jesus had done launch a plot to kill him. And for good measure, they decide they had better kill Lazarus, too, because he's the reason so many people are starting to believe in Jesus. So ironically, raising Lazarus from the dead sets things in motion that ultimately lead to Jesus' own death.

Isn't that odd, that the ultimate good deed should incite a murderous plot? Were the plotters so enthralled with death that they would choose it over life? Did they really think it would have been better for Lazarus to stay dead? Jesus said that he came so that people might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). But the plotters are having none of it. Given a chance to choose between death and life, they chose death.

Walker Percy, the great southern novelist, once commented on a 20th century American paradox: while we were making all sorts of pronouncements that affirm life – self-actualization, self-expression, self-improvement, self-esteem – we were living in the most death-dealing century in history. The 20th century, Percy said, “is the century of the love of death,” and our god is the God of Death, *Thanatos*. He wasn’t talking about horrors like Verdun or the Holocaust or Hiroshima or the killing fields of Cambodia. He had in mind “a subtler form of death, a death in life, of people who seem to be living lives which are good by all sociological standards and yet who somehow seem more dead than alive. Whenever you have a hundred thousand psychotherapists talking about being life-affirming,” he said, “and a million books about life-enrichment, you can be sure there’s a lot of death around” (*The Thanatos Syndrome*).

We socialize our kids, and especially boys, into a culture of violence and death. The jury is still out on whether there’s a direct link between violent video games and aggressive behavior, but I have to think that playing violent games for hours on end must do something to desensitize the players to actual violence. Violent video games may not turn anyone into Jeffrey Dahmer or Charles Manson, but they make violence pleasurable, fascinating, entertaining, titillating – and that can’t be a good thing.

Death, or at least fear of death, is one of our most persistent infatuations. And we have come up with all sorts of strategies to ward it off: eat better, exercise more, use sunscreen, wear seatbelts. Those are all good, sensible things that we all should do.

The most extreme strategy for warding off death is probably cryonics – freezing a body in hopes that it can be resuscitated some time in the future. You may remember that Ted Williams’s head was frozen and it’s stored at a facility in Arizona. It’s too bad the cryonics people haven’t worked out all the bugs because the Red Sox could sure use Ted this year.

It’s strange that Jesus didn’t drop everything and rush right over to Bethany. Or at least it seems strange to us. But maybe Jesus just didn’t share our obsession with death. He knew that we’re all suffering from a mortal illness, that none of us is going to get out of this life alive.

And maybe Jesus also knew that there are worse things than dying. Many of us worry about how we will die more than about dying itself. We hope to die without pain, peacefully, and with dignity. But in the end nature has a job to do and it won’t be denied, whether we’re ready or not.

By waiting where he was for three days instead of rushing to Bethany, Jesus teaches us that there are some things that are more important in the reign of God than our individual sickness or dying – the ministry, the service, whatever Jesus was doing that kept him from rushing to Lazarus’ bedside.

Gene Robinson is the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire and the first openly gay bishop anywhere. He received death threats when he was elected in 2003 and wore a bulletproof vest at his consecration service. I heard him interviewed on NPR last fall when he announced his upcoming retirement, and he reflected on the controversy his election stirred up and the threats, and he admitted he was afraid at times. But then he said that the threats and the fear

had taught him something: that “death isn’t the worst thing; the worst thing is not living your life.”

In the 15th century following the horrors of the Black Death in Europe, two Latin texts appeared called *Ars moriendi* or *The Art of Death*. They went through nearly a hundred editions before 1500 and offered advice on how to prepare to die, what a good death meant, and how to die well. That was a time when there was no choice but to die the best way possible.

We should all do what we can to prepare for our death. Living wills and durable powers of attorney and clear instructions to loved ones are the least we can do. But the best preparation is to find the dignity that we seek in dying in the dignity with which we live our lives. *Ars moriendi* is *ars vivendi*, the art of dying is the art of living. As Sherwin Nuland says in his book *How We Die*, “It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them. Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity” (p. 268).

We may not get out of this life alive. But what we can do is not allow our normal, predictable frailty to jerk us around and control how we live or determine our destiny. We can follow Jesus and let him lead us to some very different definitions about the abundant life that God intends for all of us.