

Manipulating Death

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John 11: (1-16) 17-45

“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Have you ever quit before? In every struggle in life, there is a point when we feel like quitting, when we have to ask ourselves, “Have we gone far enough?” It is that point when we want to throw in the towel, call it a day, put down our cards, and maybe be able to walk out, and exit with class, with our heads held high. It is when we realize that the work is greater than the worth, when we realize that the odds are too much, and when our hope needs to be placed elsewhere. In a classic "Simpson's" episode, Sideshow Bob and his brother Sideshow Mel (two villains in the show) were in the midst of a family feud. Through an odd chain of events, Bart, Lisa, and Sideshow Bob found themselves locked in a dam, awaiting the impending explosion at sunrise to be caused by Sideshow Mel. After considering their situation, Lisa bemoaned, "It's hopeless, utterly hopeless." To which Bob replied, "Sure, when it is one of my schemes you can't foil it fast enough, but when it is my brother, then 'it's hopeless, utterly hopeless.'" Bob was a bit disappointed with Bart and Lisa's easy acceptance of failure.

But we have said those words, haven't we? We have found ourselves saying at one time or another, the words that have been immortalized by C3P0: "It's hopeless, utterly hopeless." We have run as far as we can run, we have worked as hard as we can work, we have tried all of our options, and maybe it is time to accept reality and quit. Every parent, in every argument with their child, and every moment of boundary testing has to ask him or herself, "do I want to push this, or do I want to give in." There is a time and a place to continue to push, and there is a time and place to say enough. In the right environment, there is no shame in throwing in the towel. W.C. Fields once said, “If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it.” It's like a lion chasing its prey, after a while we have to give in if the prey is faster, smarter, or just luckier. We cannot sacrifice ourselves for each and every little struggle. There are points when we feel like quitting, at times we do. With every struggle in life, it is a decision we must make from time to time.

In many ways, the passage today is about quitting. Lazarus was ill, seriously ill, and hope was fading fast. Mary and Martha had tried everything to save their brother, even begging Jesus to come soon so that another miracle could occur. Yet it was too late. Jesus took too long, Lazarus let go of life, and fell into the shadows. But maybe, maybe if Jesus showed up in the next day then things could turn out ok. After all there had been other moments when a person who was thought to be dead was brought back to life. A daughter, a mother, and others were saved, healed and restored by Jesus' wonderful touch. So maybe if Jesus showed up soon things could turn around. But the sun rose and set, and it was time to prepare the body and place it to rest. Jesus still had not shown up, and Lazarus was wrapped in cloth, and placed in the tomb. Perhaps there was still hope; perhaps Mary and Martha were still looking to the horizon, wishing to see Jesus

off in the distance. But two days became three and three days became four and still no sign of Jesus. It was time to let go, time to quit looking and hoping, and time to begin mourning. Four days is beyond even Jesus' reach. Lazarus was truly and fully dead.

When Christ does arrive, those whom Jesus encounters feel doubt. Martha declares to Christ what the scholar Raymond Brown describes as a doubting, half faith statement. "Christ, I know my brother will rise again in the end of days, but today I mourn his death." Martha has given up today. After all, Lazarus has faced the end, the ultimate in life, which cannot be changed and cannot be escaped. Lazarus is dead. Lazarus has indeed gone beyond Christ's reach, and such a half faith, a lip service to myths and cultural beliefs on Martha's behalf is understandable. "We've given up, Lord, because you didn't make it in time, and now things have gone too far and Lazarus is beyond your power. We had to let go so we could begin to truly mourn the loss of our brother." For Mary and for Martha, it was time to throw in the towel, and accept that their brother had died. They had to quit their hope in God and turn to tears. So in many ways, this passage is about quitting.

We can relate, can't we? We have been at that time when we have to let go. We know of these situations as well, don't we? When there are no more chances around the corner, when all our possibilities have been used up, we are out of rope, the money is all gone, we are surrounded, and hope itself is dead. This is more than just quitting because it is hard; it is quitting because there is no other choice. There is no third way, no back door, no safety net, we are at the end. I pray that you never find yourself in such a situation, but I know many of you have found yourselves in such places of hopelessness and finality. And while these situations are not always centered on death, it is in death where the finality of life, struggle, and hope are greatly articulated. In the play *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare, Caesar states, "Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear; seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come." Death will come, it will be the end and it is the point where we have to stop. Those who are living with a terminal illness, or their loved ones, perhaps understand this most of all. We wrestle with the question, "when do I say enough is enough, when do I let go, and begin to say goodbye." Or when can you accept that your loved one is dying, and you will have to let go? We all have been, are, or will be in this position at one time or another. We all know what it is like to let go, to say goodbye especially in the face of death.

There are other points in our lives when we are against the wall, moments when we have to declare bankruptcy, leave the house, and give in. Remember the beginning of the *Grapes of Wrath*? The family was at their wits end trying to stay on the land, which they had worked so hard. But there was no hope, there was no way to stay, and they had to give up and leave. It is this kind of situation which I look to today, the hopeless one which we all face. Death is the most powerful metaphor, which brings to finality to the harsh reality, which we all know. So as we read this scripture of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, we can relate with their grief, and half belief and hope lost. Lazarus is dead, and it is time to let go and grieve.

But Jesus comes, four days later, and challenges us, calls us to go beyond our disbelief. Martha claims a half faith to Jesus, her lip service to meeting Lazarus in the great beyond, but Jesus responds with a statement of the here and now. "Your brother will rise again," today because "I am the resurrection and the life." But the lack of faith of Martha, Mary and the other Jews disturb Jesus. Jesus doesn't just weep, he is deeply troubled, and he is deeply disturbed by the acceptance of the finality of Lazarus' death. How long must Jesus face doubts, from feeding the five thousand, to cleansing a boy of demons, to feeding another group of people, to giving someone sight? Each time Christ is faced with half faith and doubt. Think about the times you pray for something amazing, something powerful, and something beyond hope. In the back of your mind have you already admitted defeat, instead of giving Christ the full benefit of the doubt, when you pray for the glory of God? Do you in the back of your mind expect that nothing will happen? Yet Christ calls us to faith even in the darkest hour. Christ calls us to hope even

when we are backed against the wall. Ezekiel was placed before a field of dry bones, and those bones were brought to life – surely four days in the tomb cannot stay the hand of God. Oh how our acceptance of reality disturbs him like a loving parent is moved when a child does not reach his or her potential. Think of churches, which are in times of struggle. How many of those churches turn in on themselves and wonder what they have to do to survive. What program, what system, what form of worship, what flashy music will bring the dry bones of the church back to life? We often find ourselves asking how we can control our fate before we must give up. But the theologian and pastor George Bulliard claims that God forms churches for a purpose. If that is the case then in the midst of the struggles and the difficulties we must continue to trust God, and follow God's hands rather than trying to force them. No program, flashy advertisement, or clever slogan can make up for the movement of the Spirit. As soon as we begin to look for our silver bullet, we begin to doubt, have half faith, and the great tragedy is that we have given up on God. Hear Christ's challenge of faith and power. Suspend your disbelief and accept that with God all things are possible. How it must disturb Jesus, lead Jesus to tears, and further his resolve to call us to go beyond our disbelief when we give up on hope, and quite our faith in God.

We are called and challenged to fall into God's hands and continue to trust in even the worst scenarios. Remember Abraham's faith? Remember how he took Isaac to the mountaintop, and followed God's command of sacrifice. It was what the Dutch theologian Soren Kierkegaard called a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Abraham suspends reason, he suspends hope and rational to follow God's call, and trusted God. Such faith is the faith we are called to muster and to embrace. For what did Christ do, but go to the tomb, and cry out for Lazarus in order to challenge the doubts, the questions and the hopelessness. In one movement, Christ began to show what the climax of his ministry was going to do. Christ came to manipulate death, to change reality, and to bring a new thing, the Kingdom of God here on earth. No longer a haft faith ideal, but a reality in the here and now. In his play *Lazarus Laughed* Eugene O'Neil has Lazarus, after the miracle, confronted by a Roman noble with the Roman soldiers, threatening to kill him. And all Lazarus responds is, "death is dead." Christ goes beyond the walls of death, and changes everything when he calls Lazarus out of the tomb. Death is dead, it is not the end, it is not a time of hopelessness, but just another point in our journey with God. And now all bets are off, all reality is to be brought to question, and anything, anything is possible. We are now called to live with a new focus, with what James McClendon calls a resurrection ethic, knowing that life and hope goes beyond the grave. Isn't it fitting that we read this passage just before Palm Sunday? For what are we preparing for but the death of Christ? Can we keep this hope, this grace, and this power of faith alive in our hearts as we look to Christ on the cross? Can we believe that death is truly dead? Can we suspend our own faith in reality, and adopt a faith in God who goes beyond all ends? Can we fall into God's hands even in the worst of scenarios?

If we do, then we have a new end, which is not death. We have eternal life, we have salvation, and we have peace and a place in the kingdom of God. But be careful! As soon as you think you have an understanding over what this means, step back and suspend your reason again. Martha and Mary believed that Christ was the Messiah, but limited his power over death. Christ challenged that belief. We cannot control the hand of God, we cannot guide the Spirit, and we cannot demand miracles. Many books, plays, and poems have been written about Lazarus wondering what might he have been like after his return from the grave. Kazantzakis has Lazarus return in the same form and shape, as he was in the grave, rotten. O'Neil has a different understanding of Lazarus. We cannot control the miracle, we cannot control what Lazarus will be like, how the miracle will occur, and under what circumstances. All we can do is believe that God is with us and know that that means we can end up anywhere. We don't know what the end is, and we dare not presume to begin to understand. Ah death is dead, and that means life can be anything through the grace of God. As a church we fall back into the Lord's embrace and let God lead us – not knowing who we will be, where we will go, and how we will get there. This past Friday, I was praying here in this Sanctuary, asking God for help and guidance. In case you

didn't know it, this job is difficult, and at times overwhelming. I prayed about our budget, about our members in despair and distress, about our building, and about our ministry. I prayed all of the messy hurts, all of the deep wounds and all of the painful spirituality, which I see in this church family. "God, when will this church be the 'perfect church,' the 'strong church' that does not have such concerns questions and challenges?" I cried. "When will we be the bright, shiny, happy church that knows only joy and success?" And the response to my prayer was 2 Corinthians 13:4 "It is true he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God. We too are weak in him, but we live with him by God's power in us." In the pains, the messy hurts, the despairing spirituality we are the "perfect church" if we continue to keep with God. In our suffering will we know the joy of Christ, and so we will have to trust and continue to walk with God. So I will continue to walk with you as we get tired, as we face despair, as we beat our chests wondering "how long" and I will not give up, because we have the hope of Lazarus that there is not an end which God cannot overcome in God's own way. As we struggle with our loved ones in illness we don't know what will happen, how things will turn out. We will pray for healing, but know that the Lord's healing touch is greater and deeper than anything we can comprehend. So as we prepare for Palm Sunday, and beyond, keep the power of Lazarus in your heart, know that we will still face death, but death has been changed, know that we will still struggle, but our struggles have been sanctified, and know that Christ is on the way to bring us all to Glory. Hear the words of Alexander Pope wrestling with the sorrow and the hope in this selection from *The Dying Christian to His Soul*: (st. 1)

Vital spark of heav'nly flame!
Quit, oh quit, this mortal frame:
Trembling, hoping, ling'ring, flying
Oh the pain, the bliss of dying!

AMEN