

What is ours to do

April 2, 2017

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

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Earlier this week, one of my pastor friends was telling about a recent meeting he had attended in his denomination. A few of the pastors at the meeting had been talking about significant challenges their congregations were facing, including the possibility that they might close due to an aging and declining membership. Steve noticed that some of the other pastors immediately went into fix-it mode, trying to offer advice or solutions. Steve wondered why it is hard for us simply to listen and express care, without trying to solve someone else's struggles.

It is not just pastors who face this temptation—many of us feel helpless if we can't do something to help people who are in a difficult situation. And sure, there are often concrete things we can do to be helpful. But offering advice or inserting ourselves to try to make things right is rarely the best response.

This was one of the most important things I learned when I started ministry here at LAMC. Sometime in my first couple of years as a pastor, one of you came to me with a problem. I don't even remember now what the problem was, or what I did to get involved. What I remember was that a patient church member came back to me later and said, "I didn't want you to fix my problem. I just wanted you to listen."

Thank you for teaching me that lesson. I've needed reminders since then as well, but this is the place where I first learned that responding to people's struggles does not require me to fix them.

Now to be fair to Fixers everywhere, sometimes we act the way we do because that is what people expect of us. Think of all the expectations we put on educators, to not only teach academic subjects, but also to stop bullying behavior, address dysfunctional family situations, prevent kids from harmful activities, and the list goes on and on. There are some people that our culture expects to fix things.

Jesus had a reputation as a Fixer, and he definitely earned it. A hungry crowd? He fed them. Someone sick? He healed them. Someone blind? He made them see. Someone possessed by evil spirits? He drove them out. Someone needed more wine for the wedding banquet? He provided it.

These were actions so amazing that word spread very quickly, and people from all over came to Jesus with their needs and problems—big needs, and little needs. And almost always, Jesus fixed what was wrong.

So this text from John is very curious.

Lazarus, a man Jesus loved dearly, was very ill. His sisters, whom Jesus loved dearly, sent a message to Jesus, expecting his help. Yet Jesus did not go to their house. Jesus did not use his power from a distance as he had with others. Jesus did not fix the problem when it was fixable.

Instead, he made a strange comment about the illness being for God's glory, so that the Son of God could be glorified through it. He stayed where he was for two more days. Then he announced to his disciples that Lazarus had died and that he was going to go to him and awaken him. It was at least a full day's journey to walk over 20 miles to Bethany from the other side of the Jordan River.

Why didn't Jesus fix this problem right away? Well, you could point out that the Pharisees were plotting to kill him, and had almost stoned him, and it wasn't safe for him to be so close to Jerusalem. In fact, that is what the disciples argued once Jesus did decide to leave the relative safety of the land beyond the Jordan. Thomas even said, "If he's going, I guess we go with him, and we are all going to die."

But two extra days were not going to calm down the plotting Pharisees. And Jesus was not afraid to die. Jesus did not delay because of fear. So we need to turn to Jesus' own explanation—he waited to go so that the Son of God would be glorified.

Now put yourself in the shoes of Mary or Martha. They had no idea why Jesus didn't come immediately. In their minds, Jesus could have fixed the situation. This death didn't have to happen. And so, when Jesus arrived, Martha's first words to him sound like scolding, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Mary met Jesus, her first words were exactly the same, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And some of the crowd of mourners said, "Couldn't he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Yes, Jesus could have fixed the situation. He could have healed Lazarus, kept him from dying. But he made an intentional choice not to do so, because he had a larger purpose—so that God could be glorified. He wanted people to see the activity of God both in the raising of Lazarus and in his own death and resurrection to follow.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, his first interactions were with Martha. Even while scolding Jesus for not coming in time to save her brother's life, Martha was able to affirm her faith in the end-time resurrection, which many Jews of her time believed in. But then Jesus made the final "I am" statement of the gospel of John, and the apex of those statements: "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. Do you believe this?"

This was the clearest self-disclosure Jesus had made yet. And Martha responded with this amazing affirmation: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Martha gave the response that the writer of the gospel of John hoped all of his readers will make: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Even with this confession, it is not clear whether or not Martha had any expectation that her brother could be raised to life at that time. She protested when Jesus called for the stone to be removed from the tomb that the body had been there for four days already. It was commonly believed by Jews of that time that the spirit of a dead person hovered near the tomb for three days, and that if the spirit re-entered the body during that time, the person could be resuscitated. By the fourth day, that was no longer a possibility—or so she thought. But Jesus reminded her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

As he was preparing to call Lazarus out of the grave, Jesus prayed out loud to God so that everyone watching would hear him and believe that God sent him. And when Lazarus did emerge, the greatest miracle of Jesus' ministry, many of those who witnessed it did come to believe in him.

Our other lectionary text for today, from Ezekiel, has a similarly astonishing claim that new life is possible even after all hope seems dead. The people of Israel had been in exile over ten years, and had given up the dream of returning home. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a valley of bleached bones, representing the dead dreams of the nation.

As he surveyed the scene, Ezekiel was asked if the bones could live again. The human answer was of course, no. But Ezekiel turned the question back, saying “O Lord, you know.”

Ezekiel was told to prophesy first to the bones, then to the winds. The key word in this passage, used ten times, is “ruach,” which is translated as spirit, breath, and wind. The bones came together, as if being formed in creation from the soil, then the winds blew the breath of God into them and they had new life.

So here we have two stories about despair and death, and both stories have an unexpected outcome: God brings about new life, resurrection.

This week, I pondered these texts given the question from my pastor friend, “why is our most common reaction to loss, despair, and other struggles an impulse to try to fix the situation?” What can we learn from these texts about what is ours to do, especially in situations where we can’t fix things? I think these questions really stuck with me because this week we, along with Mennonite communities throughout the world, learned of the senseless deaths of MJ Sharp, his colleague Zaida Catalan, and their interpreter Bete Tshintela in the Congo.

Barry was assistant principal at Bethany Christian High School when MJ was a fun-loving prankster making Barry’s work “interesting.” Our pastor Julia was one of MJ’s classmates at Bethany and a close family friend from the Waterford congregation in Goshen. MJ lived with one of our current AMBS students for three years in Germany, and became like Benjamin’s older brother. John Sharp, MJ’s father, is an AMBS graduate and a friend of mine and many others. Just within my little circle, there were so many connections to this young man and his family. And I know that was true in Virginia, Kansas, New Mexico, and many other places. So many people were touched by MJ’s life. None of us could do anything to fix the situation, to stop his death.

Much of this week, I wondered, “what is mine to do? What is ours to do?” I could reach out to our German student Benjamin, and let him share his grief with me, and also the stories about MJ that made him laugh. A group of Benjamin’s friends at the seminary held an impromptu prayer vigil with him when he first got the news. On Wednesday afternoon, AMBS had a prayer service for the seminary community and several of MJ’s friends who live nearby. We sent messages of support to John and Michelle Sharp and colleagues at Hesston College. Tomorrow, I will preach on lament in Hesston College’s chapel service.

In unfixable situations, what is ours to do? We can always pray for God’s strength, guidance, and healing in difficult situations. The story of Lazarus shows us a community of care gathered around Martha and Mary, being present to them. The story shows us the power of Jesus weeping with those who mourn, in solidarity with their pain. The Ezekiel vision reminds us that we can proclaim hope, even when we cannot see or even imagine how God might bring new life out of unfixable situations.

One of my colleagues sent me a New York Times article written last week by Peter Wehner, called “After Great Pain, Where is God?” Wehner noted that most of us face situations where we or someone we love are overwhelmed by pain, and we might cry out like Jesus did from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We will never know how to make sense of suffering. But what our faith offers us in the midst of hardships and heartaches is consolation.

One source of consolation, says Wehner, is “being part of a Christian community—people who walk alongside us as we journey through grief, offering not pieties but tenderness and grace, encouragement and empathy, and when necessary, practical help.”

Another source of consolation is the faith conviction that “what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal, and that what is eternal is more important than what is temporal.” Wehner cautions that as we offer this hope of eternal life to others, we not minimize their grief or overlook the importance of their grieving process. “All things may eventually be made new again,” he writes, “but in this life even wounds that heal leave scars.”

And finally, our faith proclaims that “God is a God of wounds, where the road to redemption passes directly through suffering.” God understands our suffering and suffers with us, which can give us greater capacity to suffer with others. Grief will leave its mark on our lives. But “so, too, will love.”
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/25/opinion/sunday/after-great-pain-where-is-god.html?ref=opinion&_r=2

Stubborn faith, outrageous hope, and compassionate love—this is ours to do.