

A Kaleidoscope of Emotions

John 11:1-45

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, March 29, 2020

What an emotional roller coaster we are all on! For most of us, hardly a day goes by when we don't experience a mix of anxiety, fear, grief and sadness, hope and also gratitude. We are moved by stories of human care and heroism. We share funny videos that defy isolation to cheer each other up. We fear for loved ones and for people living in crowded and unsanitary conditions without access to care. We might be a little more reactive toward people we love. Some of us are feeling overwhelmed as the prospect of using precautionary measures feels frayed with loop holes for the virus.

Our complex Gospel¹ story offers us a fascinating look at the kaleidoscope of emotions that can surface in the face of a formidable challenge. It also offers us God's presence right in the thick of it. In our story Jesus receives the news that his friend Lazarus has fallen terribly ill. One would expect Jesus to care for his friend enough to stop what he is doing and visit, especially since Jesus was a known healer. It is clear that people around him are anxious and have the very human response of looking to him to lead, take charge and reassure. Sound familiar? However, Jesus waits. In John's Gospel, Jesus has the added advantage of knowing that the power and love of God will become manifest in what is unfolding here. The question of how to respond timely and effectively has certainly been one of the bones of contention in our own public discourse.²

When Jesus does decide to go to Judea (the region also home to Jerusalem and the elites of power) to visit with Lazarus' family, the disciples panic because they are afraid. The last trip to Judea, they say, Jesus nearly got stoned and put them all at risk (John 9:8). When Jesus says that Lazarus has "fallen asleep," they quickly point out that, surely,

¹ This story only appears in John.

² I wouldn't be surprised if this response already sets off a variety of emotions and reactions in all of us given the current pandemic. Some leaders have gotten criticized for doing too much too fast. Others have been criticized for underestimating the full force of the pandemic or making polling numbers more important than people.

a trip won't be necessary then! They know how much Jesus is seen as spreading an unconditional love virus that exposes people directly to the amazing love of God in and around them and for each other. Jesus threatens the religious establishment and its whole sacrificial system that orders people's lives. Given the prospect of trouble, the disciples wouldn't mind "sheltering in place" (though for different reasons than we are).

Jesus who knows very well that people can start to act as though they are walking in the dark when they begin to feel threatened (John 11:10). We have all seen it in hoarding or the recent verbal and physical attacks on Asian Americans who are becoming our new scapegoats for our current troubles. But there are other choices. "Are there not twelve hours of daylight?" Jesus asks. "Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world," he adds. He is the embodiment of that light. For now however, the disciples can only see the prospect of death. Thomas tries to be brave and prompts his peers to follow Jesus to Judea, saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him (John 11:16)." We know that they will abandon Jesus when push comes to shove but they are trying to be faithful – a human challenge we all know too well. All the more amazing that many health care professionals literally are risking infection and death daily in order to help others, often without adequate protective equipment.

When Jesus and the disciples do set out, Lazarus has already died. Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary are deeply distraught at the loss of their brother. Martha, the one who tends to cope by being practical meets Jesus first and shares her conviction and implied disappointment saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She retains a glimmer of hope still urging Jesus to act (John 11:22) but is still working through what she actually believes about the power of rising to life again. She was taught this would be possible on "the last day (11:24)" but Jesus reframes this experience of dying and rising as a reality that is possible now. He will personify it through his own story of suffering crucifixion and resurrection. As will become manifest,

this pattern is always shaping all our lives in the present and beyond³ as we face the reality of death and suffering. In the midst of it we can also experience the reassurance of a love so deep that not even this suffering or death can separate us from God (Romans 8). Our shared matrix of dying and rising will now become exemplified in Lazarus as is our invitation into a deeper heart trust.

I recognize that this can feel very abstract and heady. Thankfully, we also have the witness of Mary. Mary offers us a direct inroad into our emotions than her problem-solving sister. Both perspectives have their place and are real responses. Mary also immediately says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (John 11:32).” Mary’s primary emotion, however, is a deep sadness. As most psychologists would say, underneath anger and even anxiety is also often a deep grief for what has already been lost or for what we fear we will lose. Mary is so distraught that she is beyond actively managing and simply falls at Jesus’ feet, crying her heart out. We may know such overwhelm and see it in people who are living in crisis.

As the story unfolds, we now encounter how the human and divine dimensions are one in Jesus. He is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” Jesus begins to weep (John 11:33-35). Here we have Jesus embody for us how much God identifies with us in the midst of our grief and trauma. God is not separate from us but inexplicably sustains us in all things. God does not dismiss our fear but can help to free us from the tyranny of fear in the midst of fear, as *Living School* teacher Jim Finley likes to say.⁴ Whether we can see and embrace this is another question. Sometimes we get waylaid by our old traumas or by demands for certain outcomes rather than resting in God as our ground even in our not-knowing. Jesus remains rooted and compassionate.

³ It is also real in the context of eternity which is not something that begins at some future point but is the deeper reality that holds us all the time.

⁴ See www.cac.org, Living School.

The people around Jesus respond in a variety of ways. Emotions remain raw. Some are touched by how much Jesus obviously cares. Others are mostly angry or dismissive because their expectations of outcome have not been met. They may not be in touch with their own underlying fear and sadness. They ask, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blinded man [last week’s story], have kept this man from dying? (John 11:36).” Jesus is not moved by the criticism but by Mary’s tears and his own compassion for those who suffer. His love is big enough for everyone involved whether they understand or don’t, need to criticize or not, are scared or full of hope. He understands. Jesus is grounded so deeply in love and compassion that he can remain a non-anxious presence.

Rather than judge people, he engages them in communal action. Rather than impose an outcome, he offers a possibility. Although practical Martha warns him of the prospect of the stench of a corpse that has lain there for four days, Jesus says: “Take away the stone (John 11:39).” I am struck by how the raising up of Lazarus has both this communal and an individual dimension. The community acts in faith by rolling the stone away but Lazarus still has to get up and emerge, funeral wrappings and all. So, Jesus boldly cries out: “Lazarus, come out!” When he emerges, Jesus again calls for further communal action, saying: “Unbind him and let him go (John 11:45).”⁵

What can this ancient story teach us in our own circumstance? It seems to me that all of the characters, including Lazarus, represent our real and potential responses to what we are going through. It is of utmost importance that we become aware of our own thoughts and emotions so that we can be gently and compassionately present beyond mere reactivity. As David Kessler spelled out in an interview⁶, many of us are actually feeling grief without being able to name it as such. There is a loss of normalcy and

⁵ This raising of Lazarus moves many people to believe in Jesus as the Christ. Others will immediately plot to kill Jesus and Lazarus who is now a living example of Christ’s power to bring us to newness of life outside of the whole established Temple ritual sacrifice system that has been controlled by the religious elites.

⁶ Scott Berinato, “That Discomfort You Are Feeling is Grief”, Harvard Business Review, March 23, 2020.

economic stability (to the extent this is ever real). The world has changed and even though many of the challenges will be temporary it does not necessarily feel that way. We may find ourselves already anticipating further losses as we fear the death of a loved one. There may be a more generalized loss of a personal sense of safety however illusory that is to begin with. We may also react with anger or go in circles about “what if” and “if only” scenarios. We need to be gentle and compassionate with each other.

While there is a need at times for a healing break from all the news and input, it remains important that we are present to what is, including what is happening in our bodies.⁷ Naming and feeling what is *is* the pathway forward through the suffering into the light of connectedness and hope. Rather than let our anxiety go viral, we can meet it and touch it with compassion. Only then will its power dissipate.

As our story reminds us, the incarnate God is with us, is our ground and anchor in the midst of all this. Jesus shows us that God loves us no less in our fear, sadness and overwhelm. We are also invited to rise up despite our fears. God mobilizes us to take measures that roll away stones and unbind each other from hardship, right here and beyond our own community. We can also look collectively at how this crisis keeps asking us to reevaluate what actually most matters and sustains us and what does not – whether it is the pace of our lives, our economic values, or our care for each other and all of creation and more. God is truly still speaking and drawing rainbows (Lorelei’s bulletin cover). God is with us. Thanks be to God.

⁷ Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "A good friend of mine said, 'You are married to sorrow.' And I looked to him and I said, 'I am not married to sorrow. I just choose not to look away.' I think there is deep beauty in not averting our gaze, no matter how hard it is, no matter how heartbreaking it can be. It is about presence, bearing witness. I used to think bearing witness was a passive act, but I don't believe that anymore. When we are present, when we do not divert our gaze, something is revealed. The very marrow of life. We change. A transformation occurs. A consciousness shift."