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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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John 11:1-45

How many of us can hear our own voices in Mary and Martha's expressions of grief and disbelief?

Sometimes when I imagine meeting Jesus all I want to do is confront this person who claims to be the Son of God by saying, "If you really cared about me, if you were really a loving God, then you wouldn't have let this happen to me and the people I love."

I would wait for an answer, but am willing to bet that Jesus would say to me, just as he said to the disciples, that this happened so that the son of God may be glorified through it.

He says this to the disciples about the death of Lazarus, and he says it in last week's gospel when the disciples ask why the man was born blind. Today it is "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." and last week it was "He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

This is I think where some people interpret the will of God as "everything happens for a reason" theology. But the Truth of what Jesus teaches us is that the nature of humanity is such that when people suffer, die, are cast aside, have doubt and struggle to understand why God did all this, is that in the midst of all of the grief and despair there is opportunity for God's glory to be seen. It is not some amorphous reason that is beyond our understanding, but the question of where is God in this, and how can I as a person of faith turn my eyes towards God, and help others turn toward God when what we really want to do is accuse God of forgetting us, of hurting us, of talking those we love away from us.

This week I found myself struggling almost all week with the Gospel because I just couldn't get past my own experience of grief and sadness. I was having a really really hard time reconciling the fact that clearly Jesus can heal all the people in the world, and can resurrect the dead but only provided miraculous healing for a select few and in the case of the bringing back from the dead he only did it once for Lazarus. "Other than him being your friend Jesus, what was so special about Lazarus?", I found myself literally yelling at my computer screen on Thursday.

But on Friday I met Cindy.

Cindy Pascal is the mother of Emma Pascal. Emma died last fall in a tragic accident when she was a freshman at VCU. She fell from a window in the Tower on Franklin apartments in October of 2016. Cindy contacted me early last week asking if she could bring "Love, Emma" bags to our Red Door Ministry meal on Friday.

We get requests like this occasionally. So when I got the request from Cindy I honestly didn't pay too close attention to it, I emailed her and called her and we worked out a time for her to come and distribute the bags.

On Friday she walked into my office - I was in a funky mood. It was rainy it was cold, people were more stressed out about parking than usual because the church was completely blocked off for the Monument 10K. A contingent of our normal volunteers were out with a nasty virus, others were out of town, and it seemed like we would have more volunteers than guests for lunch. I had retreated to my office to write down an idea for this sermon, our seminarian Sarah Price knocked on my door. She said the lady is here with the blessing bags. I let out an audible sigh and I stood up.

Cindy seemed to bound into my office, she started telling us about her daughter how she died, and how the last thing that she did was send out a snapchat of some items which she left in the Tower Apartments for someone in need : a small gift, one dollar, and a kind note signed with, "I

love you, you are deserving of love." When Cindy shared the screenshot of the snapchat with me my heart simultaneously broke open and was healed.

Cindy went on to explain that she wanted to make sure that Emma's legacy was one of love and respect. She overjoyed that VCU's office of Community Engagement had referred her to us first, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church she knew the Episcopal Church to be a place where her daughter's social justice work would have been well received and our continued work with the VCU community and the greater Richmond community was a perfect launching site for this project.

Before lunch, Cindy, spent time with our student volunteers and shared about the items which she intentionally placed in each "Love,Emma" drawstring bag- Kind Bars, Bomba Socks, Swell Bottles, and Burt's Bees Toiletries. As she talked she shared Emma's story, she shared her grief, and she shared her love. As she distributed the bags to our 55 guests on Friday she greeted each one of them with a smile and an offer of a hug and explained that the Kind bars were healthy and didn't have any added sugars or chemicals, the bottles keep liquids cool for 24 hours and hot for 12 hours, the socks were designed for folks who are on their feet all day and the company actually makes special ones for folks who are homeless and she would like to work with them but for now these she purchased on her own. Cindy also asked folks what they needed and when someone said I need foot powder, she hopped on line and ordered a case from Amazon to be delivered next week. This was radical and unexpected generosity was transformative.

At one point I heard Cindy talking with a couple of our regulars, friends of John Bishop. They were speaking about the shared experience of losing a loved one to tragedy. I stood on the steps listening to these women share their stories and I found myself changed from feeling like Mary and Martha - angry and frustrated and thinking If Jesus were only there that things would have been different. To remembering that Jesus is here and because of that things are different.

Jesus is in the midst of us, in the brokenness, in the tragedy, in the loss, in the grief of our lives. Because Jesus knows the pain of sin and death we can know Him and be transformed by Him and we can take those things that hurt so deeply and use them to transform the world around us. It is in the shared experience that we can begin to understand one another and ultimately the only experience that all of us will know is the experience of the end of life as we know it, in physical death.

The only thing that all of the people we have met with Jesus throughout this season of Lent have in common is death. Nicodemus, the powerful religious authority, the Samaritan woman, the powerless outcast at the well, the man born blind at the temple gate, and Lazarus' sisters seeking answers after the death of their brother; they all are living under the shadow of death.

Some of us are powerful. Some of us our outcasts. Some of us are disabled. Some of us are part of estranged families. Some of us are part of strong families. But all of us face death, all of us experience death, all of us grieve.

When we grieve we are given the opportunity to turn our hearts and we can do that in two ways towards blame and anger and hate, or towards love and grace and acceptance. In our best times we can like Cindy allow the love of God to shine through our suffering, but most times we swing like a pendulum back and forth between the two.

But Christians know that the grief and pain of death while it is ours, and is an extremely personal and at times difficult journey to walk. It isn't all about each of us alone. It is about all of us, together. Through our shared experience of death we can understand the sacrament of remembrance which Jesus invites us into each week at the Eucharist, this is our common ground.

Mary and Martha's grieving for Lazarus, is a foretaste of the grief for Jesus. A grief embodied in sacrament weekly, in outward signs of invisible grace. Grief that the disciples know when Jesus is arrested after he blessed and

broke and shared the bread, after he blessed and poured and shared the wine and said do this in remembrance of me.

We are people who believe that death is not the end. We know that hope comes in the morning. That on Easter in a few short weeks we will again celebrate with joy the resurrection. That every Sunday is a sabbath, a respite, a little Easter celebration when we are given the chance to remember Jesus who we love, died for us, but also gave us the hope of eternal life.

Some weeks the memories are harder to process than others. Some weeks the remembrance is tinged with despair, as mine were at the beginning of last week. Some weeks the remembrance is buoyed by love, as Cindy's were at the end of this week. Every week the remembrance is central to our liturgy of Eucharist, of Thanksgiving, regardless of if we are mourning or celebrating, Jesus is present in the Holy Mystery and we proclaim the mystery of our faith that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again.

Let us remember together the mystery of our faith - with bread, with wine, and with incomprehensible grace.

Amen