

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Gifts of Jesus

(Studies in John's Gospel, leading to Easter)

Broken Beyond Fixing

(John 11)

#3

Introduction: Fixer-Uppers Anonymous...

A couple of years ago, the set of scales in our bathroom stopped working. It's an electronic, digital set of scales. So, I got out my soldering iron (not a gun) and soldered a broken wire back in place. Amazingly (not all of my fixes work), the scales started working.

Over the years I've actually quite a few - cars, toys, yard tools, toilets and ceiling fans. And I'm really not all that good at fixing things. I know people who are far better at repairing stuff than I am.

I'm just rarely in the mood to buy something. I'm frugal. (My children had another word for it.)

Not everything is fix-able, of course.

One time, I wasn't able to fix a bathroom heater, so I had to buy a new one of those.

And one lawnmower went through several years of service after it should have been retired. It was beyond fixing.

There have been other unfixables at our place.

Some things are fixable. Some things aren't. With something that's fixable, you fix it. Maybe you even send it to a shop to get somebody else to fix it. But you don't give up on it if there's hope.

There comes a point, though, when you stop fixing and start shopping. We've all had cars like that. It's time to give up on old faithful. It would take a miracle get her going again.

Or maybe there have been times when you've felt that way about your life?

You get to a point where you admit that you are so broken - body or soul or mind or circumstances or relationships - that it would take a miracle to make it right. There's something about your world that is broken beyond your ability to fix it up.

Over the past two weeks, we've watched as Jesus fixed one hungry situation involving thousands of people by miraculously providing food and another time when He fixed up a man with sight who had been born blind.

This morning, we'll watch as Jesus encountered a situation that required more than a fix-up. He fixed someone who was beyond fixing.

The setting is the village of Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. The cast today consists of Jesus and three of His good friends.

Jesus, Lord of Life, [finally] Went to Bethany (vv. 1-16)

The Sickness of a Good Friend (vv. 1-5)

Friends from Bethany (vv. 1-2, 5)

[1] Now a certain man was sick: Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

[2] And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.¹

We never meet Lazarus in the Gospels, except in reference to what we are going to see today. We know little about Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, except that Jesus loved them all. **[5] (Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister, and Lazarus.)**

We aren't told where Jesus was as the story begins, but we do know that He wasn't in Bethany. The sisters sent word to Jesus, telling Him about Lazarus' condition.

An implied request for help (vv. 3-5)

[3] So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."

This is not *exactly* a request for help. But, in giving Him the news, they knew that Jesus *could* and they likely hoped that He *would* do something about it.

Jesus previews to a miracle (v. 4)

[4] But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not meant for death, but it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of Man may be glorified by it."

Jesus was somewhere outside of Jerusalem, a couple of days journey away, when he got this disturbing news about Lazarus.

Knowing that He loved Lazarus and the sisters, we expect Him to catch the next flight to Bethany to go heal His friend. He's already healed a lame man and a blind man. Healing was what Jesus did.

¹ There are several "Marys" in the New Testament. The best known are Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, from whom seven demons were cast out (Luke 8), and this Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. This Mary was a contemplative, whose sister, Martha, was more comfortable as a do-er.

But Jesus didn't leave. He loitered.

Preparation for the Disciples (vv. 6-16)

Jesus loitered before going to see Lazarus! (vv. 6)

[6] So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

OK. Try to put yourself in the sandals of Jesus' twelve disciples. You've left Judea (the region where Jerusalem was) recently, after several heated skirmishes with the Jewish rulers.

Those guys didn't like it when Jesus healed a man born blind on the Sabbath day. Then, twice in recent months people have picked up stones to stone Him to death. All this happened down in Judea.

You, a disciple, watch Jesus *not* respond immediately to Mary's and Martha's news about Lazarus, and you're thinking,

"Great. Jesus finally 'gets' how serious the Judean situation is. He's waiting for the heat to subside. Very savvy move on the Lord's part. Stay put. And Lazarus' situation doesn't sound all that serious, anyway. We'll no doubt pray for Lazarus. It's nice to see Jesus playing it safe this time."

And just as those thoughts came together, Jesus spoke to His followers.

Jesus surprised His disciples (vv. 7-8)

[7]... "Let's go to Judea again."

To which they responded, **[8]... "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and yet You are going there again?"**

The disciples definitely didn't understand what Jesus was thinking. He wasn't going to play it safe at all.

And for the life of them, they don't understand the timing of Jesus' intervention in Lazarus' predicament.

If He's been planning on going to Judea where Lazarus is, why did He waste precious time while Lazarus was probably getting sicker? Why didn't He go sooner?

This issue of the timing of Jesus' interventions - or non-interventions - has long been a question for those who follow Him.

Why did He stop healing in any of the villages while people were still waiting in line to be healed?

Why did He cut His visits to some cities and villages short, not even go to some villages?

Why did He not save Saul of Tarsus earlier, a savings in time that would have saved some Christians from persecution?

Why did He not intervene in the lives of suffering Christians in the Soviet Union era?

Why does He not more often intervene today in so many places?

Why does He allow a chronic suffering to continue in your life, giving relief sooner rather than later?

It can be confusing. But it is not that Jesus delights to confuse us. He is, though, comfortable with our confusion because He knows that in our confusion, faith will grow if we turn to Him.

So, the disciples may very well have been confused by Jesus' delayed plans to now go to Judea.

Of course, knowing the end of this story, we would counsel them to trust Jesus. We know that He knows what He's doing! (Just as they, now knowing the end of their story, would counsel us to trust Jesus. They know that He knows what He's doing...)

If the disciples were confused, they were also afraid. Afraid of what would happen when they went to Judea.

So, Jesus has words for them.

Jesus instructs His disciples (vv. 9-10)

[9] Jesus replied, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. [10] But if anyone walks during the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

He wants them to not worry. Simply trust and obey. But He isn't taking them to Judea for their health and safety.

No, He's taking them to Judea because of an overwhelming passion for the glory of God (v. 4). And if walking into a hornet's nest was what was required to bring maximum glory to God, so be it.

And then, because clarity is so crucial, Jesus clearly tells His disciples exactly what they are walking into. First, euphemistically.

Clarity is Never Overrated (11-16)

Speaking euphemistically (vv. 11-12)

[11] This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."

We realize what Jesus was actually saying. Because in Jesus' day, as in our own, *sleep* was a euphemism for death.²

These days, we talk about someone who has gone to sleep, gone on to their reward, entered their rest, when what we mean is that they have died.

But the disciples, never ones to miss out on missing something obvious, didn't catch His drift.

[12] The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

That comment convinced Jesus to set aside euphemisms.

² "Euphemism" literally means "a nice saying." It is a nice way to state something unpleasant.

Speaking plainly (vv. 13-14)

[13] Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. [14] So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead"³ [15] "and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."

Sleep presents the disciples with no problem. Sleepy people - even sick, sleepy people like Lazarus - wake up. But death is different. Death presents a problem beyond fixing.

Now, as they see it, they are walking into a hopeless situation. Hopeless for Lazarus. And, according to Thomas, hopeless for them.

Speaking pessimistically (v. 16)

[16] Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."

Pessimistically speaking, this is utterly heroic. Thomas assumes that going to Judea will mean loss of life. But - and get this! - he's ready to go if that is what following Jesus requires.⁴ And, with that, they all piled into the van to head south into Judea.

Jesus, Lord of Life, On His Way to the Tomb (vv. 17-37)

Arrival at Bethany (vv. 17-19)

In the ancient world, decay and the disease that came with it, made a quick burial after death a necessity.

So, let's assume that it was a two-day trip for the messenger to get from Bethany to wherever Jesus was. Then, shortly after the messenger left Bethany to find Jesus, Lazarus died.

Next, Jesus delayed two days before leaving for Bethany. Thus, nearly a week had passed between Lazarus' death and Jesus' arrival in Bethany.

[17] So when Jesus came, He found that he (Lazarus) had already been in the tomb four days.⁵ (file that tidbit away...)

And, Bethany being very close to Jerusalem (fifteen stadia is about two miles), ***[19] ...many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them about their brother.⁶***

While all the mourning was going on for Lazarus, ***[20] Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house.***

As soon as she was with Jesus, she spoke.

Jesus and Martha: The Gift of Eternal Life (vv. 21-27)

Dancing around eternal life (vv. 21-24)

[21] Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

Now, is it possible that Martha was trying to lay a guilt trip on Jesus for taking so long to get to Bethany? Maybe. But that is not what I think is going on.

I think Martha was simply expressing her confidence in Jesus' ability to heal. If He had been present, He could have prevented the death.

Martha follows that statement up with an intriguing comment. ***"Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."***

³ How did Jesus get this news? The only way Jesus could have known about Lazarus' death was by virtue of the fact that He was God in the flesh.

⁴ Ironically, they do not die, but Jesus does. And far from standing by Him, they all fled in the face of danger in the Garden of Gethsemane when He was arrested.

⁵ Jewish legend had it that the soul lingered around the dead body for three days but gave up hope on the fourth day.

⁶ This has led Bible scholars to suppose that Lazarus, Mary, and Martha were well-connected to the Jewish leadership, and likely wealthy.

She believed that in some way, Jesus could redeem even this situation. He could bring something positive out of a tragic loss.

It may even be that she believed Jesus *could* raise the dead. But, when Jesus said, **[23] “Your brother will rise again.”** Martha wasn’t thinking about anything immediate.

[24] Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

But that wasn’t at all what Jesus was talking about.

Shooting straight about eternal life (vv. 25-27)

[25] Jesus said to her, “I am⁷ the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

He’s claiming to be the Source of life. He is the Restorer of life to the dead. And Martha does the one and only thing Jesus asks her to do. She believes.

[27]...“Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”

It’s important for us to see that the miracles in John’s Gospel are all physical “signs” of a greater, spiritual, reality.

Multiplying fish and loaves for thousands of people was a sign pointing to Him as the Bread of Life. Giving sight to a man born blind was a sign pointing to Him being the Light of the World.

And (spoiler alert) as great as raising Lazarus from the dead will be, what this miracle points to (signals) is that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. He gives eternal life to the one who believes.

⁷ This is another example of an “I AM” claim by which Jesus claims to be the same Person as the One (God) who appeared to Moses at the burning bush and declared Himself “I AM” (Exodus 3).

This is Jesus’ offer to you today. Eternal life if you will simply believe. And this - that you believe in Jesus - is the point of this miracle, this passage, and this message.

We’ll come back to this in a couple of minutes. But for now, back to Bethany...

[28] When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

Mary, who had been grieving the loss of her brother, Lazarus, composed herself, and then left to go to Jesus.

Jesus, Mary, and the Crowd: The Gift of Compassion (vv. 29-37)

[30] Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. [31] Then the Jews who were with her in the house and were consoling her, when they saw that Mary had gotten up quickly and left, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there. [32] So when Mary came to the place where Jesus was, she saw Him and fell at His feet.

Knowing what we know about Mary, we aren’t surprised that she was more demonstrative, more emotional, than Martha had been.

But when she spoke to Jesus, her words are exactly what Martha had said: **“Lord, if You had been here my brother would not have died.”**

She, too, has a tremendous confidence in Jesus. He could have healed Lazarus of his sickness.

And Jesus, looking at her grieving, and seeing the crowds also grieving, **“was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled.”**

I am struck by what a mature, manly, deeply personal response to the grief of others this was.

His response reminds us that while Jesus was God in the flesh, He was not an alien. What we celebrate at the Christmas season - Jesus' incarnation - is that God actually became one of us.

[John 1:14] "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
He entered fully into humanity, with all its physical limitations and its emotional highs and lows.

This past Monday we held a memorial service here at church for someone who had recently passed away.

I spoke with the family about Jesus' compassion for them in their hour of grief. It is true. He grieves as we grieve. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.

He cared for Mary and Martha and the crowd of mourners gathered in Bethany, and He cares for you in your griefs and losses.

Jesus then walked, with Mary and with the crowd that had gathered, to the tomb where Lazarus had been laid.

Jesus and Death: Disaster, Waiting for Restoration (vv. 34-37)

[34] and He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." [35] Jesus wept.⁸ [36] So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!"

[37] But some of them said, "Could this man, who opened the eyes of the man who was blind, not have also kept this man from dying?"

Yes, isn't it fascinating that the crowds said essentially the same thing Mary and Martha had said about Jesus being able to keep Lazarus from dying?

⁸ There is more to verse thirty-five than a favorite memory verse (it is, after all, the shortest verse in the Bible)! This gives proof positive that Jesus had a rich emotional life, that He was moved by the human condition, and that He truly cared for people.

And, yes, Jesus loved Lazarus. And yes, He was saddened by the grief of Mary, Martha, and the crowds.

But, after a week of reflection on this scene, I have come to think differently than I have before about Jesus' weeping.

I don't think His tears were primarily a matter of Him entering into the sorrows of those who were grieving.

I think it was because He saw - and He was the only one there at Lazarus' tomb who saw - just how **wrong** Lazarus' death was.

Death was not in God's original plan. Human beings were made to live, not to die. But then, sin entered the world and made a wreck out of everything.

The central element of that mess involved death. Death is unnatural, a perversion of the original plan. Death is a monstrous atrocity.

Jesus saw all of that, and He wept at the wreckage.

Now, though, it's too late. Now, Lazarus is broken beyond fixing. Death is unfixable. You don't get healed from a bad case of death. Unless...

Jesus, the Lord of life, saw all of that, wept, and then proceeded to do what only He could do.

Jesus, Lord of Life, Raises the Dead (vv. 38-44)

Preparing for a Miracle (vv. 38-40)

Four days dead... (vv. 38-39)

[38] So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. [39a] Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

Hearing Jesus' instructions, everyone there would have been wondering to themselves, *"What in the world is He doing?"*

The ever-practical Martha said out loud, **[39b] "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days."**⁹

Resurrection is the last thing on her mind. She's thinking about the mess they will have on their noses if that tomb is opened.

She's grieving, sure. But she's not so caught up in grief that she can't express her revulsion at what Jesus is about to do. *"Don't open that tomb, Lord!"*

Believe and you will see... (v. 40)

[40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

The men standing by did as Jesus instructed and removed the stone from the front of the tomb.

With the stone out of the way and with the stench of decaying flesh filling the air (Yes, I think Martha's fears were justified. Four days in the tomb meant that decay had begun to set in.), Jesus moved into action. He prayed.

From Death to Life! (vv. 41b-44)

Prayer (vv. 41b-42)

[41b]...And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. [42] But I knew that You always hear Me; nevertheless, because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me."

The surest sign of dependence on God is prayer, and the best way to bring a God focus to any event is to pray. So, Jesus prayed. The prayer He offered up was short, sweet, and to the point.

⁹ The King James version has, "he stinketh."

Alive! (vv. 43-44a)

[43] And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth."

And come forth Lazarus did!¹⁰

[44a] Out came the man who had died, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth.

Can you imagine being there? Nothing like this has ever happened¹¹ and nobody present was expecting it.

Each miracle we've seen in John's Gospel has been increasingly spectacular.

Water into wine at a wedding was wonderful, but not as amazing as healing a lame man, walking on water, feeding thousands with a few morsels of food, or giving sight to the blind.

But all of those are minor repairs compared to this.

He had told His disciples early on that Lazarus' sickness would result in the glory of God. He told Martha right before the opening of the smelly tomb that she would see the glory of God.

And where is God glorified more than in this miracle, when Jesus is revealed to be the Resurrection and the Life, able to perform a miracle by which the curse of death is reversed?

This - death to life - is the glory of God!

Free! (v. 44b)

¹⁰ It has often been mentioned, that if Jesus had not specified "Lazarus" all of those in the tombs would have come forth.

¹¹ There were a couple of Old Testament resurrections, but nothing of this magnitude - a man four days dead.

[44b]...Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

He has taken a man who was broken beyond fixing and fixed him. Lazarus, while still needing to recover from the tomb, is free to live.

His mind was restored. All body functions are operational. His spirit and soul have re-animated his body. He was, in every sense of the word, alive, having been, in every sense of the word, dead!

And John faithfully records the intended point of the "sign."

[45] Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.

Conclusion:

Lazarus had a problem. He had a BIG problem. His problem was so big he could do nothing about his problem. Lazarus was dead.

Jesus breathed life into Lazarus, and in so doing, breathes hope into every one of us today.

A Jesus who can raise the physically dead to physical life can also raise the spiritually dead to spiritual life. That is His offer to you and to me and to everyone we know.

All that is required for us to pass from death to life is to believe in Him.

There is nothing we can do, no good work we can perform, no price we can pay that will bring us who are dead to God to spiritual life. We bring nothing to the table but absolute need.

To receive eternal life, you have to...what?

Believe in a completely reliable Jesus. Trust Him to do what He promised He would do. Believe that He will do for you, spiritually, what He did for Lazarus, physically.

I invite you today to turn to Jesus, believing that He, the Lord of Life, will give you eternal life when you do.