

All-Encompassing Love

John 11:1-44

Today we come to the passage from which our current series gained its name—“see how he loved them” (cf. Jn. 11:36). John 11 is a pretty familiar story to many of us, one of the more dramatic miracles that Jesus accomplished during his earthly ministry—raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus, we learn in the opening verses, was the brother of Mary and Martha—the same Mary and Martha whom we meet in Luke 10, where Martha is busy serving and gets mad at Mary for sitting at Jesus feet (Lk. 10:38-42). And the same Mary who, John tells us, “anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair” (11:2)—which happens in the next chapter, John 12, but is also recorded in Matthew and Mark (cf. Matt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9). Lazarus, however, is unrelated to the main character of the parable in Luke 16 (the rich man and Lazarus, Lk. 16:19-31). The Lazarus of the parable was fictional; Lazarus here in John 11 was a real historical figure. He and his sisters lived in a village called Bethany, just under two miles outside of Jerusalem. And the tragedy they are about to face—the one we just read about—offers us another window into the heart of Jesus, and what we might describe here as his *all-encompassing love*. A love that’s ready to meet us wherever we are with all that we need, stretching from the personal and intimate—the unique circumstances of each story, each life—to the ultimate and eternal—that which transcends all our stories and lasts forever.

It’s rare to encounter anyone today with that kind of all-encompassing scope to their work. Ever since Henry Ford and others stopped using the same workers to build the entire car, and instead put them on an assembly line where they got really good at building one part of the car—one specialized skill—our economy hasn’t looked back. There are very few generalists anymore. And that’s true across industries. Athletes train to become experts in single events. Professors teach and research only one sliver of a single subject. Even in biblical studies, you’ve got scholars who specialize not simply in New Testament versus Old, but in single books. ‘I’m a 2 Corinthians scholar; don’t ask me anything about 1 Corinthians.’ The healthcare industry is increasingly specialized. Surgeons who perform the exact same procedure twelve times a day, six days a week. Rare is the generalist who is available enough to treat you for a cold but also skilled enough to do heart surgery.

And that’s not a bad thing. For most industries, it’s impossible to be an expert in everything. But it amplifies just how remarkable it is to meet someone whose work is truly all-encompassing. And that’s what we find in our passage with respect to Christ’s love. It stretches from the personal and intimate to the ultimate and eternal, and everywhere in between.

Notice the intimacy with which Jesus’ relationship to Lazarus and his sisters is described. When Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother is sick, look at how they phrase it: “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (v. 3). Not “our brother Lazarus is ill,” but “he whom you *love* is ill.” That’s a pretty remarkable way to describe their friendship. And that’s just it, there’s a *friendship*

there. A personal intimacy. An intimacy the narrator describes again in v. 5: “Now Jesus *loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” An intimacy others could recognize in the way Jesus wept at Lazarus’s tomb. Verse 36: “So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” Jesus is the kind of doctor who is first and foremost a friend, who enjoys sharing life, who meets us where we are, whose love is not above making a house call in the middle of the night.

Yet, at the same time his love is ultimate and eternal. He’s available enough to treat you for a cold, but he’s also skilled enough to perform heart surgery—to remove our heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. And we see that when we look at the very next verses after those we just read. “‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ But when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it’” (11:3-4). There’s something bigger going on here. Something cosmic and eternal. Something that concerns not merely the wellbeing of a friend, but the very glory of God being revealed in his Son. And look at vv. 5-6: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” That doesn’t make any sense! He loved him, and *so he didn’t come help him right away*...but let him die. There’s something larger at work, something ultimate, that we can’t readily see. Look also at vv. 36-37: “So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?’” That’s a fair question. Of course Jesus should be able to keep him from dying. So if he loved him, why didn’t he—unless there something bigger and more ultimate in play?

And what’s truly remarkable about the all-encompassing scope of Jesus’ love is not simply that he’s proficient in each area—he knows when and how to love in a personal and intimate way, and when to love on a larger, more eternal scale, like a jack of all trades—what’s remarkable is how he brings those sweeping elements together. And we see that marriage of the intimate and the ultimate throughout our story.

Ultimate Purpose in Personal Ministry (11:1-16)

First, in vv. 1-16, we see an ultimate purpose in personal ministry. There’s something transcendent and eternal at play in the intimate conversations and interactions that Jesus has. Again, as Jesus said in reaction to the news of Lazarus’s illness in v. 4: “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Nothing Jesus does is disconnected from the greater mission to bring glory to his Father—honor, praise, worship, the allegiance of all nations—which will be accomplished through the glorification of the Son. In fact, his greatest act of love is to bring us into that glory. To behold and delight in, to rest in and depend on God in all his perfect majesty and mercy. There’s an ultimate purpose in personal ministry.

But his disciples don’t exactly understand this. When he informs them in v. 7 that they need to go to Judea again, they think that’s a terrible idea. Because they just came from Judea, where at the end of ch. 10, the Jewish leaders attempted to stone Jesus for making himself equal with God (cf. 10:31-39). Which is interesting context, because not only does it explain the hesitance and confusion of the disciples, it actually signals what makes Jesus’ all-encompassing love possible.

How is Jesus uniquely able to love us in a personal and intimate way, as a friend and companion, but also in a way that is ultimate and eternal, pulling us into God's plan of redemption from before the dawn of time? It's because Jesus the man is at the same time one with the Father. As he says in ch. 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Which is not a clever way of saying 'we're tight' or 'we're on the same page.' Being on the same page with God doesn't get you killed. Claiming to be equal with God does: "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God" (10:33).

But this is what makes his all-encompassing love possible: Jesus Christ is true God and true human in one person. It's the mystery of the incarnation that we just celebrated with Christmas. Because Jesus is truly human, he can relate to us. He's close enough for friendship, vulnerable enough to share in our grief, like us enough to take our place in death. Because he is truly God, he is wise enough to work all things for our good and his glory, holy enough to roar against sin and death, and powerful enough to command the dead to rise. In all that he does in his personal interaction with others, there is an eternal purpose at play—an eternal purpose that turns on and magnifies the glory of God.

And that's not just true for Lazarus and his family; it's true for us as well (though it's often hard to believe). Some of us have had a lousy 2018. We faced challenges this past year that we never imagined, and it makes us nervous for the year ahead. We can't see how what we've endured, or what we're enduring, can in any possible way turn out for our good or God's glory. But neither could the family of Lazarus. That didn't mean God wasn't at work. And while I don't want to minimize the very real pain that many of us experience, what we see in this story is a reminder that there is no tragedy outside the scope of God's eternal plan. He is always sovereign and always good, even when we can't see it, even when we feel like we'll be crushed under the weight. He is always at work for the glory of God, bringing God's eternal plan of redemption to bear on the specific circumstances of our lives.

And so he responds to the disciples' hesitance in two ways. First, he reminds them that as long as there's daylight, there's work to do. "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" (11:9). Yes, the sun is setting on his personal ministry, and the hour of his crucifixion draws near. But until it sets, there remains an eternally significant purpose to his work, and theirs (cf. 12:35-36).¹

And then he tells them what that specific work is right now: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him" (v. 11). Of course the disciples misunderstand the metaphor and think that Lazarus is merely sleeping. And so Jesus clarifies, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe" (11:14-15). Jesus' personal ministry to Lazarus and his family will reveal God's glory not merely to that family, but to all who see and believe.

And so they set out for Judea. And by the time they arrive Lazarus has already been buried for four days. The family is gathered to grieve, and many others are gathered with them. And what we see next in Jesus' conversation with Martha is an ultimate hope in personal grief (vv. 17-27).

¹ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 408-409.

Ultimate Hope in Personal Grief (11:17-27)

If you're familiar with the story of Mary and Martha from Luke 10, you won't be surprised by their different reactions. Martha has a kind of a take-charge personality. And so when she hears that Jesus has come, she goes out to meet him, while her sister Mary remained seated in the house.

And she meets him with honest, personal grief. She says in v. 21, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you" (11:21-22). What an incredible mixture of honesty, grief, and faith. She believes in Jesus' power, but is puzzled by his absence—"if you had been here, he would not have died." And yet she remains loyal, trusting—"even now I know that whatever you ask from God he will give you."

And so notice how Jesus loves her in that moment. He loves her by gently speaking truth. Verse 23: "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'" And Martha's response is basically to say, 'Yeah, I know.' "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day (v. 24). When we think of resurrection, we think almost exclusively of Christ. But resurrection was the hope of all ancient Israel and the early church. It's something all God's people were looking forward to, as promised in the Old Testament in places like Daniel 12, and as expressed earlier in John's Gospel, when Jesus says in ch. 5:28-29: "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [God's] voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29; cf. Dan. 12:2). The resurrection is for everyone, the day coming in the end when God would make all things new and everything sad would come untrue (cf. Rev. 20). And there is real comfort in that—life-changing comfort. It's the hope we all look forward to in the face of death even today—that the dead in Christ will rise.

Martha understood this, and believed it. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. Or not exactly. He's about to take the power of that resurrection to come—that ultimate hope—and bring it into the personal grief and present tragedy of the situation. Because Jesus is not just speaking words of comfort here; he is revealing his glory. His identity, his power. Bringing ultimate hope to her personal grief.

Look at his declaration in vv. 25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." The tragedy you're grieving, the tragedy Lazarus has experienced, the greatest enemy that everyone on this earth must face—I am the answer to it. I am the resurrection and the life. In me, Jesus says, death does not get the final word. Because of who he is—the Christ, true God and true man, whoever believes in him, even if you die, you will live again, and never die.

Jesus loves Martha by gently speaking truth to her amid her grief. And sometimes that's exactly what we need amid the tragedies and challenges that we face—to be reminded of the truth. It's so easy when life falls apart to simply panic or give way to fear, to allow the lies we're afraid of to take over and dominate us, to lead us to despair. We need to be reminded of the truth—that Jesus is with us, and that he is the resurrection and the life. That there is no brokenness beyond the

scope of his redemption. That we don't have to be in control or have the answers or know the way forward as long as we have him.

Jesus loves Martha by speaking truth. And Martha confesses her faith in Jesus. "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" (v. 27). Even if she doesn't yet realize what that means for Lazarus in this moment.

But as the conversation turns then to Mary, notice how Jesus takes a different approach. Verses 28-37 show us an intimate grief over an ultimate problem.

Intimate Grief over an Ultimate Problem (11:28-37)

In v. 28, Martha sends for Mary to come to Jesus. And she comes, and a cohort of mourners with her, who assumed she was going to the tomb to grieve. And listen to what Mary says to Jesus when she sees him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 32). The exact same thing that Martha said earlier. Two sisters, suffering the same loss, expressing the same words.² Yet notice how Jesus responds to Mary. Unlike Martha, whom Jesus gently corrects and instructs, he's virtually speechless with Mary. Look at v. 33: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'" (11:33-36).

Whereas Jesus loved Martha by gently speaking truth, here he loves Mary by simply weeping with her. Sharing in her sorrow and grief. His love is all-encompassing—ready to meet us wherever we are with all that we need. Tim Keller summarizes it beautifully:

Jesus gives Martha what we would call the ministry of truth. That is what she needs most at that moment. He sort of grabs her by the shoulders with truth. 'Listen to me! Don't despair. I'm here. Resurrection. Life. That's what I am.' Because of his divine identity, he is high enough to point her to the stars. Then, when he gets to Mary, he gives her what we would call the ministry of tears. That is what she needs most at that moment. Because of his human identity, he is low enough to step into her sorrow—with complete sincerity and integrity—and just weep with her.³

It's beautiful, and amazing. An all-encompassing love. And again, that's not just true for Mary; it's true for us as well. If Jesus is your Savior, he is present with you right now. He understands your tears, and shares them. There is no grief beyond his empathy or comprehension. Hebrews tells us that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

And not only can we take comfort in Christ's ministry of both truth and tears, we can reflect that all-encompassing love toward others. If every trial or tragedy in our life is an opportunity to trust Jesus more, then every tragedy that those around us face is an opportunity to see Jesus and his

² Several of these observations owe to Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 40-57.

³ Keller, 50-51.

glory as well. Sometimes that means taking up the ministry of truth, and gently pointing others to the hope of the gospel of Christ. Sometimes that means sitting with them in the ministry of tears, and simply sharing their grief. We need wisdom to know what's appropriate, and we can trust God to give it. To reflect the love of Christ through truth or tears.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. As several commentators point out, where most translations says Jesus was "deeply moved" in v. 33 and v. 38, that's a polite way of saying he was *really ticked off*. "Bellowing with anger,"⁴ "outraged in spirit."⁵ As Paul Miller describes, "He was steaming—like a boiling pot whose lid is about to blow off. His anger and agitation boiled over into a stream of tears. Jesus was angry . . ." Not at Mary or Martha, or even the crowds, but "at death and its effect on those he loves. Death is not part of the beauty of life; it is part of the brokenness that love seeks to mend."⁶

Jesus' love reveals an intimate grief toward an ultimate problem—the problem that plagues everyone, spoils everything, and from which none of us are immune—death. And the ultimate problem of death owes to the primordial and perennial problem of sin. Death was not part of God's good design; it came into the world as a result of human rebellion against God, as a just and holy judgment on sin. As Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." It's primordial in that it comes from the fall, all the way back to the beginning of humanity's story. But it's perennial, in that all of us are not just affected by it, but guilty of it. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Therefore death reigns in a fallen world. And this angers Jesus. It ticks him off. It's not the way it's supposed to be. So as he enters into Mary's grief and the grief of all those mourning Lazarus, his spirit roars with anger.

And then he does something about it. He tangibly helps. He reveals his glory and his unique ability to undo this ultimate problem: the eternal power of his intimate love. That's what we see in vv. 38-44.

Eternal Power and Intimate Love (11:38-44)

Verse 38:

Then Jesus, deeply moved again [roaring in anger], came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." (11:38-39)

Martha believes in Jesus but she still doesn't have a category for what he's about to do.

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." (11:40-42)

⁴ Keller, 53.

⁵ Paul Miller, *Love Walked Among Us* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001, 2014), 239.

⁶ Miller, 239.

Jesus gives us here an intimate window into his eternal relationship with his Father. This is for the benefit of those watching, that they might see his glory (cf. 11:4).

When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (11:43-44)

Jesus doesn't just roar against the problem of death, he does something about it. He reveals his eternal power through his intimate love, in raising Lazarus from the dead. He is the resurrection and the life.

And he will do something about death for all of us. The point of raising Lazarus is not to say that any Christian who gets sick will be healed in this life, or any Christian who dies will be raised in this life. God can do that, and he may do that. But the point here is to redirect us to the source of ultimate hope amid our personal trials, to declare in no uncertain terms that Jesus alone holds the keys of life and death. If you want in on the resurrection to come, if you want to enjoy eternal life with God in heaven and the glory of the new heavens and new earth to come, there's only one way to do it: believe in the Lord Jesus.

He loves us with an all-encompassing love. Because he is truly God, he is wise enough to work all things for our good and his glory, holy enough to roar against sin and death, and powerful enough to command the dead to rise—to deal with the ultimate problem. Because he is truly human, he is close enough to be our friend, vulnerable enough to share in our grief, and like us enough to take our place in death, the greatest expression of his intimate love.

And that's where this story is heading. For Jesus to truly conquer death, it means he must eventually deal with the root problem, the cause of death—human sin. If death is the result of sin, then you can't deal with it or undo it without defeating sin. And there's only one way to defeat sin—for a righteous substitute to take our place. Someone who is not guilty of sin—perfect and holy in every way—to willingly take sin's penalty for us—to die in our place. Only then can God deal justly with sin in punishing it fully, but mercifully with sinners forgiving us completely. As 1 Peter 2:24 says of Jesus, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

That's where this story is going. That's what Jesus' all-encompassing love will require—to meet us wherever we are with *all* that we need. The disciples weren't crazy to worry about Jesus endangering his life by going back to Judea. That's exactly what happens as a result of his raising Lazarus from the dead. The story continues in v. 45: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, 'What are we to do?'" (11:45-47). Their conclusion: "So from that day on they made plans to put him to death" (v. 53).

But of course Jesus knew this. It was part of the plan to reveal his glory and redeem the world. As Keller summarizes,

He knew that if he raised Lazarus from the dead, the religious establishment would try to kill him. And so he knew the only way to bring Lazarus out of the grave was to put himself into

the grave. He knew the only way to interrupt Lazarus's funeral was to summon his own. If he was going to save us from death, he was going to have to go to the cross, and bear the judgment we deserve.⁷

And that's exactly what he was willing to do, and ultimately did, in love. And not just for Lazarus, but for you and me. For your friends and your neighbors. Your parents and your children. Your colleagues and your classmates. His love is all-encompassing, it is for everyone. Ready to meet us wherever we are with all that we need.

And so may hold fast to the love of Christ wherever we find ourselves, in whatever situation. That there is no tragedy outside the scope of his eternal plan. No brokenness beyond the scope of his redemption. No grief beyond his empathy or comprehension. In Jesus, every trial is an invitation to know him more personally and intimately, and to see his glory and hope in his redemption on an ultimate and eternal scale. And every challenge that those around us face is a chance to show that love to others. May we be ready to love others wherever they are with all that they need. Not by becoming or replacing Jesus, but by embodying his compassion and pointing them to the person—the only Savior, Jesus. Whether through the ministry of truth or of tears, or of tangible help. May we love others so well, that when those looking on see what's happening, they'll be able to say, 'See how they loved them. Just like Jesus.'

⁷ Keller, 55.