

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday November 1, 2009, based on John 11:32-44.

I Sing a Song of the Saints of God

I cannot hear this story in John 11, writes Barbara Brown Taylor, a theologian and teacher who lives in Georgia, without thinking of my friend Matilda, who died nineteen years ago. She had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, which means that she gradually lost control of all her muscles. Her face went first, then her vocal chords, then her legs. For the last year of her life, she communicated by writing on a slate, one of those erasable things kids play with. Sometimes she would write and erase faster than anyone could read. Matilda found a lot to be excited about.

Watercolors, for instance. When she could not talk anymore, she taught herself to paint, until her kitchen walls were papered with tulips, peonies, daffodils, and hibiscus. When you went to visit Matilda, you painted. That was one of the rules. It did not matter if you had no ability, if the last time you held a paint brush was to put a coat of latex on your bathroom wall. Matilda stuck one in your hand, shoved a plastic egg container full of colors in front of you, and you painted. The best part was afterwards when she admired your work, sticking her thumb in the air and rewarding you with her loose, drooling grin.

Like Dr. Taylor, I cannot hear the story of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in John 11 without thinking about the power of death and what our faith has to say about it. In scripture today, Jesus arrived at a funeral with upset sisters and a dead friend. During his interact with both sisters, each

sister said to him, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" I have said a few prayers where I have said, "Lord, if you had been there this would not have happened!"

Our problem is that death is the great reality for all of us. Everything that lives, dies. Death is the one constant that we all have in common. Yet, we hardly ever want to talk about it, and we are shocked when it happens. To live is to die. Death is the end of beginning.

My proposition today is that unless we come to accept our death and transcend it, we can not really live.

I think I was in my early 30s when I had to deal with my own mortality. By that time, I had conducted over 50 funerals as a minister. So I was not unaccustomed to dealing with the reality of death. But when I was in my early 30s, a doctor in the congregation that I was serving who was about my age died. It turns out that the doctor was not handling the stress of his occupation very well and had become addicted to drugs. A combination of prescription drugs that he thought he could use without others noticing brought his demise. He left behind a wife and two children under age 6.

I remember riding back to the church from the cemetery with the casket bearers. We were all members of the same church. We were all professional men. We were all about the same age. Our ride was very quiet. I think we were all thinking about our morality and the power of death that day.

It is easy to decide that death happens to other people, that it is far into the future, that we don't have to think about it today. But then

someone we care dies. We are diagnosed with a serious illness. Or a young person dies in violence in war or on the streets of Chicago, and once again death becomes a reality. Death is a part of life.

So, we can ignore it. Be afraid of it. Not talk about it. Be shocked by it. Or we can deal with it and look for answers.

Mary and Martha were looking for answers that day with Jesus. They knew that Jesus was a great healer. They wanted Jesus to do something, and what he did gave us a preview of what to believe in when it comes to our own mortality.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that John 11 is a preview for what was to come. She writes, *"It is a kind of rehearsal for what lies ahead, in which Jesus does for his friend what God will do for him. It is his and our assurance that there is power loose in the universe that is stronger than death, stronger even than our fear of death, which is able to call us out of our stinking tombs into the fullness and sweet mystery of life."*

Taylor continues her story by writing:

It was all I could do to watch my friend (Matilda) die. I wanted someone to walk into her room with a pill or a prayer that would cure her illness or at least halt its progress, but even if Jesus himself had showed up to call her from her tomb – she would have had to die all over again later, as Lazarus did. It would have been a rescue from death instead of a triumph over it, a resuscitation instead of a resurrection.

Something bigger than that was going on with Matilda. Every time she lost something she thought she could not live without, she found out she could. First there was a painful void that lasted an hour, a day, a

week. Then something new moved in to fill the empty place: fresh series of painting, a new friend, a deeper sense of the presence of God. "He is calling me," she wrote on her slate one day, "like a bridegroom calling his bride."

Her resurrection began before she died and everyone around her saw it. When she set her cup down it was empty. There was nothing wasted, nothing left over to spill or lament. She died clean as a whistle, and several of the people who sat by her bed that day say their fear of death died with her. Having watched her do it, they believe they can do it too.

Lord, I believe, but help thou my unbelief, because I still do not want to die. I believe Jesus has power to raise the dead, only I do not want him practicing on me. I want a God who will cut my losses and cushion my failures, a God who will grant me a life free from pain. I want a God who will rescue me from death, who will delete it from the human experience and find another way to operate.

What I, what all of us, have instead is a God who resurrects us from the dead, putting an end to it by working through it instead of around it – creating life in the midst of grief, creating love in the midst of loss, creating faith in the midst of despair – resurrecting us from our big and little deaths, showing us by his own example that the only road to Easter runs smack through Good Friday.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus says to grieving Martha earlier in John 11 – He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." [□] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to

him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,[□] the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Yet she was the one who protested when Jesus wanted the stone of the tomb removed.

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Not "I will be" but "I am" – right here, right now – resurrection and life for anyone willing to believe that it might just be true. It is not a safe story, but it is a strong one, with power to lead us through the graveyard and out to other side.

Today is a good day to speak of the other side. In a moment, we will remember those who have died in the last year. As humans, not only do we fear the power of death, but we experience the loss of loved ones through death. This upsets us as well. But like Martha and Mary, we know this is a reality as well. Our only alternative to not grieving a loved one is to not love anyone else – not be in relationship with a spouse, or parent, or child, or sibling, or friend. One sure way to avoid grief is to not care. But we do care. Our nature is geared for relationship. So we celebrate all our relationships and risk grief when any kind of relationship ends. But we are richer because of that relationship.

I titled my message today, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." This comes from a song written by a British woman named Lesbia Scott over 80 years ago. The first verse goes –

I sing a song of the saints of God,
 patient and brave and true,
 who toiled and fought and lived and died
 for the Lord they loved and knew.
 And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
 and one was a shepherdess on the green;
 they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
 God helping, to be one too.

All Saint's Day is about remembering the example of those who have gone before us and trusting in the power of the resurrection. Because of my faith, I am not afraid to die. This is a benefit of my faith in God through Christ. I don't know what will happen. But because I am not afraid to die, I feel I can get the most out of each day and live life to the maximum. All it takes is the willingness to come out of the tomb and live. I have died many times through different life situations, but my faith in God has always brought new life. I have never been the same, but I have experienced new life. New life is about hearing God's voice to come out and live! Even in a graveyard, faith brings us to the fullness and sweet mystery of life! Our invitation is to take those bandages off and live! Amen.