

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **People communicate love in a lot of different ways.** Have you noticed that? My friend Janice bakes to show you she loves you. My husband does the same. **My dad's a talker**, I think I get that from him. As a teenager, I'd feel super awkward when he'd have a tender emotional moment and do something that felt way cheesy to me, grabbing on my hand and saying really intensely, "I just want to tell you how proud I am of you, and how much I love you." **My mom on the other hand isn't one to get super emotive with words. She tends to be more of a do-er.** Whenever she comes to visit, within an hour she's usually cleaning the kitchen. I used to feel really self-conscious about it, like she thought I was total slob, but then I realized it was just her way of showing my love. Now when she comes and cleans my house, I receive it with joy.
- B. **My kids each have their own way.** Gwen loves to draw us pictures. Junia wants to cuddle. Elliott communicates love just by telling us about what's on his mind regarding the latest video game he's into, and I try to demonstrate love by listening well.
- C. I share all this to say that in these four decades I've been alive, I've been fortunate to have a **number of opportunities to experience loving relationships and to learn how to communicate that love well.** But this season I've been in in the last several months, has brought new dimension to that. **How do we communicate love when things aren't so sweet?** How do we give and receive love in the very challenging? When love makes us particularly vulnerable, by which I mean, it exposes us to hurt?
- D. As a lot of you know, **in the last six months, cancer has turned the world upside down for two women who are incredibly close to me, both of whom I love deeply:** my sister Mandy and my dear friend Abby. And there are moments when I'm left unsure how to communicate love.
- E. This week **I called Abby to check in**, and I could tell just from the tone in her voice that she was having a hard day. Abby's now more than three months into aggressive treatment for leukemia. And it's been exhausting. There have been multiple hospital stays. Lots of inconvenient blood transfusions. Chemo is rough. We do what we can to keep laughing, shopping for funky wigs, and watching inappropriate tv shows in the ER, but as I've now seen up close with both Mandy and Abby, chemo really is a beast that just takes so much out and it's not always clear if what you're getting is worth the cost. So I got on the phone this week with Abby and heard that even her, who often smiles through the pain of it, didn't have the energy to smile or muster any cheerfulness. **"I'm bummed." She said.** She had just seen her oncologist for an update on where things were at and where to go from here. "He says to expect another two years from now of treatment before I'm done." As she went on, she relayed the details with a kind of weight and resignation that was painful to hear. Gone was the "I got this; I'm a warrior" energy. Now, she's in the weariness of it all, already over it and ready to be done with cancer treatment, to go back to some sort of normal life, even just the humdrum of taking her kids to school and shopping at Costco, let alone working. And though she's ready to say *enough already* after three months of treatment, the doctor says she's only just begun. There are silences on the line, a rare thing for us. What can one even say? What does love in that moment look like?
- F. **We're winding down a teaching series we've been exploring through Lent: "Vulnerable Together".** In it, I've been inviting us to consider aspects of our human vulnerability, and what those might teach us about a God who is also vulnerable.
1. **The idea that God is vulnerable is a paradoxical one.** Most of us feel much more comfortable thinking of God as *invulnerable*. As strong. As bigger than our earthly

problems. There's something awe inspiring about a God that is beyond it. Maybe we like to some beautiful part of creation like Muir Woods, or the Pacific Coast or the night sky somewhere where you can see the Milky Way and feel awed by the scope of it all and the God who made that scope.

2. And while there's something comforting about Divinity that's bigger than our little worries and fears, **it's not always particularly personal**. There are moments when it feels not like the world is opening up, but that **it's closing in all around us**. Moments when our hearts are fragile and overwhelmed and all that matters in the world is right here - this one person we love who's sick. This child who's hurt. The loved one on the phone with whom we're sharing silence cause there are just no words. And yet while that silence lingers, the world is still going on. In those moments, the expanse, the world that's unaffected by our pain, can feel callous and cruel. **The God that participates in the rest of that happy world feels far away.**
3. Today I want to look at a story that leans into this paradox of a God who is bigger than our humanity, but is also just as vulnerable as us. It's a story about Jesus' response in one of those moments where words often fall short, after the death of his friend Lazarus.

II. The Lazarus Story

- A. First, a little background. **The Lazarus story is a unique story that we find only in the gospel of John**. You likely know the basic premise: by many accounts Jesus' most spectacular miracle is that he raises Lazarus from the dead. **If you've heard the name Lazarus at all, you probably know where the story I'm talking about is going**. And lest we think performing a resurrection is just something Jesus does in the spur of the moment as the spirit moves, the way John seems to tell the story, Jesus knows as Lazarus is dying that he is going to raise him from the dead. That's days before he does it.
 1. So **there's the set up** that foreshadows the end of the story, in which Jesus indicated that a huge miracle is gonna happen. And **there's the miracle itself**, which many believe is the climax of John's argument that Jesus is indeed GOD-IN-THE-FLESH. The way John tells the story this huge Lazarus miracle is the straw that breaks the camels back. It's the one that catalyzes his enemies. For John, Lazarus' resurrection is the match that lights the fuse leading to Jesus' unjust death.
 2. But **today, I'm not so interested in those parts of the story**: neither the set-up, nor the miraculous conclusion, nor even the consequence of that miracle. Don't get me wrong: those all matter. But the miracle of resurrection is not the only story John 11 tells. While many are fascinated in this story by the parts which reveal the unique God-nature of Jesus, the one who can raise the dead, today I am interested in the parts that reveal his vulnerable human side, and what it means to us in our vulnerability. Because that to me, is good news, too.
 3. So let's read that part of the story, when Jesus arrives in Bethany.
- B. **17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days already. 18 (Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 so many of the Jewish people of the region had come to Martha and Mary to console them over the loss of their brother.) 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary was sitting in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will grant you."**

23 Jesus replied, "Your brother will come back to life again."

24 Martha said, "I know that he will come back to life again in the resurrection at the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies, 26 and the one who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who comes into the world."

28 And when she had said this, Martha went and called her sister Mary, saying privately, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you." 29 So when Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 (Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still in the place where Martha had come out to meet him.) 31 Then the people who were with Mary in the house consoling her saw her get up quickly and go out. They followed her, because they thought she was going to the tomb to weep there.

32 Now when Mary came to the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the people who had come with her weeping, he was intensely moved in spirit and greatly distressed. 34 He asked, "Where have you laid him?" They replied, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 Thus the people who had come to mourn said, "Look how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "This is the man who caused the blind man to see! Couldn't he have done something to keep Lazarus from dying?"

38 Jesus, intensely moved again, came to the tomb.

1. So between the setup and the miracle, this is the story we have: **Jesus encountering two grieving women** in the wake of losing their brother, someone he cares about deeply. From elsewhere in the gospels, as well as in this story, we get a sense of how close Jesus was both to Lazarus and his sisters. You may remember the story of **Jesus dining in their home where Martha, the busy hostess, admonished her sister for sitting at the rabbi's feet** pondering his teaching rather than serving him dinner. Jesus is more than a spiritual leader who floats in with some words of encouragement. Yes, he is their rabbi, but he is more. He's a close friend, a loved one. Earlier in the story, the sisters reached out to him with the words, **"Lord, the one you love is sick."** But Jesus didn't rush there, he waited. And now that he has finally arrived at this intimate place of grief, **each has a response for him that names the depth of their pain.**
2. Martha says it first: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Mary shares the same lament when she finds him, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* The others who've come to grieve with and comfort the sisters, have their own version, *"Couldn't he have done something to keep Lazarus from dying?"*
 - a) **These are the statements of the forsaken. The questions of the hopeless.** They come from the place we go when we are so heartbroken and bewildered by life's turn of events that we grasp at some way to understand, some cause that could have changed our circumstances, some person to blame that which feels so beyond our control.
 - (1) "If we hadn't had so much financial stress, our marriage could have survived."
 - (2) "If only I had gone to the doctor sooner, this pregnancy might have survived."

- (3) “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”
- b) Jesus arrives to a persistent question that everyone seems to be asking. Why didn’t he come sooner? Why didn’t he stop this from happening? **Where was he?**
- (1) Now let’s just name, no matter who you are, that’s a hard spot to walk into. I have to admit, I am not as mature as Jesus. I’m an enneagram 3 which in part means I care a lot about people thinking I’m doing things well. If I sense people are blaming me for something going wrong, particularly something high stakes and emotional, I tend to get defensive. But **Jesus doesn’t respond with defensiveness**. He doesn’t deflect their hurt or justify his behavior. He responds not with self-protection but with genuine love in the midst of pain. So what does that look like?
3. The first important thing I notice is this: **Jesus doesn’t prescribe a process for the women’s pain**. Rather, he responds to each person’s grief in a unique way, following their lead.
- a) Martha and Mary both start with the same statement, the “Lord, if you had been here....” cry. But they take it in different directions, and Jesus follows the lead of the person he’s with.
- b) **Martha wants to have a conversation about hope, and Jesus meets her there**. For her, she follows the “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” with, “But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will grant you.”
- (1) Now I don’t think she’s saying this because she’s expecting him to raise her brother from the dead. It seems clear later in the story she assumed that’s not possible. No I think she’s naming that **she is heartbroken that her brother has died, but that fact doesn’t undo what she, her sister, and her brother have all come to be passionate about, participating in the in-breaking of God’s benevolent way that Jesus seems to be bringing**. Even if she grieves that Jesus couldn’t or wouldn’t stop this scenario from playing out the way it did, it hasn’t shaken her conviction that he is the *sent one*, the one who moves with the authority of the Divine. She still believes Jesus is connected to something beyond and that is a source of hope, even in the face of grief. She needs that. She’s reaching out to Jesus pleading for assurance that her hope is not misplaced.
- (2) And Jesus meets her. He encourages her with his own hopeful words, rooted in faith. “Your brother will come back to life again.”
- (3) Martha assumes he’s talking about a life beyond in the future, but Jesus seems to correct her. He calls her to trust that in his very self, right now is life that can endure, resurrection that somehow breaks through, even death. Life in the midst of loss that is available to all who put their trust in him. He uses a word in speaking to her called *pisteuo*. It is often translated “believe” (which makes us think it’s cerebral) but **it also means to trust**, as in, to actively trust in or entrust one’s self to. Jesus is meeting Martha’s questions with assurance that she can trust him, and that that trust has meaning.
- (a) ***“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who trusts in me will live even if he dies, and the one who lives and trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?”***
- (b) Yes, Martha responds. And then she gives a pure declaration of faith in who Jesus is, even in the wake of disappointment. Even in the midst of grief. ***“I trust that you are the Christ, the Son of God who comes into the world.”*** Even

when all is lost, even when nothing makes sense, even when I'm so disappointed, I trust you are the Messiah.

- (4) In the wake of loss, in the unresolved questions, in the bewilderment of heartbreak, Martha is looking for hope beyond her present circumstances. Jesus is there to gently meet her in that place.
- c) But as we've seen in other stories, **Martha and Mary are not the same**. Mary does not eagerly rush out to meet Jesus, seeking spiritual solace. She is deep in her feelings. When her sister tells her the rabbi waits for her, she approaches and falls in a pool of tears at his feet. Mary's always at Jesus' feet. Learning torah. Soon she'll be anointing these same feet with perfume and her hair. Here she wails at his feet. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Period. No "but". **There's no declaration of faith**. Only disappointment and heartbreak. **Mary is in the place of raw desolation and Jesus doesn't try to talk her out of it.**
- d) **Miriam Greenspan is a psychotherapist and author of a book called *Healing Through the Dark Emotions***. In it she shares part of her story, how ten years into her vocation, she lost her first child, a baby boy named Aaron who died two months after he had been born. His whole life had been lived in the hospital. Dr. Greenspan was overwhelmed with unbearable grief, understandably. But she also noticed how uncomfortable others felt around her grief when it stretched from weeks to months. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV*, which is sometimes called the "psychiatrists Bible", patients grieving the death of a loved one are permitted two months to exhibit symptoms like sadness, insomnia and loss of appetite. If their grief persists beyond that, they may be diagnosed with depression and treated with prescription medication. As Greenspan writes, ***"Grief, perhaps the most inevitable of all human emotions, given the unalterable fact of mortality, is seen as an illness if it goes on too long."***
- e) How many of us have felt this tension between our own feelings and what others expect us to feel? When Jesus encounters Mary at the tomb, he doesn't prescribe her medication or preach a sermon she's not looking for right now. Because Jesus doesn't prescribe a process for our pain. He lets her words of heartbreak and betrayal stand without dispute.
4. **But Jesus does more than stand as witness to Mary's pain**. He does something else that is also important. **He allows himself to feel Mary's pain. He enters into the helplessness of human vulnerability.**
- a) Yes, Jesus knows what's coming. He knows this moment of loss is not the last moment. He knows there's something around the corner, in this case, very close around the corner. But that doesn't stop him from inhabiting this moment of pure grief fully.
- (1) In the wake of Mary's emotional display, Jesus himself shows two strong emotions, emotions that are unique for him.
- (2) First, there is an indignant anger. The word in Greek is "*enebrimesato*". We see it twice in this little passage, in verse 33 and verse 38. Our translation says he was "intensely moved" but it doesn't give the full thrust of this feeling. The word generally refers to outrage, to anger, literally to an anger that makes you snort with fury. It's a strong, strong feeling.
- (3) And then when he approaches the tomb itself, and sees the evidence of death with his own eyes, he weeps. He joins those who have been shedding tears for days. He joins Mary who is wailing at his feet. He is overcome with grief too, and he weeps.

- (4) I read a number of scholars this week who say this can't be about Jesus feeling sad or mad about Lazarus' death because he knows he's going to raise him. He must be mad at the devil, they say, and sad that the devil seems to have won here.
- (a) But personally, **I can't help but wonder if that is simply the musing of straight cis white male theologians (as scholar Christena Cleveland calls them theo-BRO-gians) who perhaps do not see the value in emotional experience.** Perhaps they do not see the value or truly understand the power of entering into another's emotional landscape, feeling *with* them. Perhaps they don't get how transformative that is for our hearts. How meaningful it is to receive.
- (b) **Wes Moore is an author and activist.** I recently heard him interviewed in a podcast where he described the difference between sympathetic love and empathetic love in a way I found so helpful, and it illuminates what I think Jesus is about here. *"Sympathetic love" he said, "is a love where you're basically saying, 'Well I'm doing this because I feel bad for you.' An empathetic love is, 'I do this because your pain is also mine.'"*
- (5) This, empathetic love is not an easy love. It's a costly love, costlier than sympathetic love. **Empathetic love is a love that hurts.** But that choice to ***hurt with*** has power. This is the choice I think Jesus is making at the tomb. Jesus is led by Mary into the desolation of human vulnerability. Into the tragedy of it. Into the grief of no consolation. And he is willing to sit in the dark with her. He allows himself to feel the dark of desolation. He weeps. He snorts with anger at the injustice of it all. He encounters the loss. He loves with real empathy.
- (6) When I hung up the phone the other day with my friend, after listening, after waiting in silence, after praying for her, after ending the call, **I put down the phone and I wept. I couldn't help it. I wept, and wept, and wept.** I wept for the grief of this reality my friend was facing. My tears were mixed with my own kind of snorting rage at the injustice of this moment. I felt angry that she has to face this, that my sister has to face her version, that they did nothing to deserve this. I felt enraged and grieved that I can't take it away. And I can pick up their kids at school, and bring groceries, but I can't do treatment for them. My desire to help, and comfort, and make better seems so futile in the face of all of it.
- (7) **In moments like those, I find more comfort in a God that weeps, in a God that snorts with us at the heaviness of it all, at a God who is broken open, then a God who is above and beyond it.** Yes, I long for resurrection. Yes, I long for miracle. Yes, I am actively trying to live a life trusting in the one who calls himself resurrection and life, but in the moments before the resurrection, in the moments when the world is closing in and it is hard to see beyond this here and now to some brighter day, **I need to know that God's heart heaves with mine.** I need to weep and not be rushed. **I need the empathy of a vulnerable God.**
- (8) At the end of our passage you see that second snort of anger from Jesus. He snorts as he walks to the tomb. If we kept reading, we'd see him perform an amazing miracle. It's a great story. I encourage you to go home and read it. But today I just want to end our study of this passage by pointing out that it's Jesus's snorting anger that compels his action in the story. He doesn't come in as a sympathetic savior and change the story. His miraculous action is catalyzed by his empathetic

love. Jesus' heart heaves with us. And that heave has the power to bring deliverance. **God's vulnerable empathy changes things.**

III. Throughout this series, I've been inviting us to attend not just to my voice, but to other voices who can share their own stories of vulnerability. Before we end, I'm going to welcome Ginny to share her own reflection on vulnerability and empathy in her life. (Ginny's Story)

IV. Conclusion:

A. I know this has been some heavy stuff this morning. We're not gonna talk at you any more. But I want to give you a moment to sit with what's stirring for you from what I shared, and what Ginny shared. I'm gonna give you the questions to meditate on, and these will be discussion prompts when we break up, or if they feel too personal, just feel free to discuss whatever feels relevant. I'm gonna invite you to sit with these questions in silence for a few minutes, and then I'm gonna close this reflection time with a poem that is also a prayer, and then we'll take some time to discuss a little bit.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. **In areas of pain in your life, how could God support your process? What are you looking for now?** Words of hope and encouragement? Empathetic love that feels with you? Or something else?
2. **If Jesus was feeling with you now, what would he feel?**
3. **Where do you feel challenged to move from sympathy to greater empathy in relationships in your life?**

"Starting Over - Fighting Back" by Sheila Cassidy

And so we must begin to live again,
We of the damaged bodies
And assaulted mind.
Starting from scratch with the rubble of our lives
And picking up the dust
Of dreams once dreamt.

And we stand there, naked in our vulnerability,
Proud of starting over, fighting back,
But full of weak humility
At the awesomeness of the task.

We, without a future,

Safe, defined, delivered
Now salute you God.
Knowing that nothing is safe,
Secure, inviolable here.
Except you,
And even that eludes our minds at times.

And we hate you
As we love you,
And our anger is as strong
As our pain,
Our grief is deep as oceans,
And our need as great as mountains.

So, as we take our first few steps forward
into the abyss of the future,
We would pray for
Courage to become what we have not been before
And accept it,
And bravery to look deep within our souls to find
New ways.

We did not want it easy God,
But we did not contemplate
That it would be quite this hard,
This long, this lonely.

So, if we are to be turned inside out, and upside down,
With even our pockets shaken,
just to check what's rattling
And left behind,
We pray that you will keep faith with us,
And we with you,
Holding our hands as we weep,
Giving us strength to continue,
And showing us beacons
Along the way
To becoming new.

We are not fighting you God,
Even if it feels like it,
But we need your help and company,
As we struggle on.
Fighting back
And starting over.