

John 11

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "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."

John's gospel depicts a Jesus that I have often struggled with. When I preached the gospel of John with the UKirk students four years ago, I often referred to the Jesus depicted in the gospel of John as sneaky Jesus. For Christ appears to pop out of nowhere and make strange decisions that seem border on being out of character. Maybe it's just that John holds more of the mystery of Jesus Christ on the surface than the synoptic gospels, but I struggle with a Jesus that seems a little smug in his withholding of a revelatory nature. If Christ came to earth to reveal who he was, then I would like him to do that. Sneaky Jesus seems to dodge questions with the best of them and have a plan that only he understands. And this passage is no exception. We are still following behind sneaky Jesus, who stays where he is when his friend is dying, who doesn't give a reason, who just goes when he wants to even though the family has all gathered for the funeral of Lazarus.

Maybe Jesus was in the midst of grieving too. Maybe he smelled the stench of death coming from that tomb before it was even opened. Maybe he was just focused on getting there because he knew he was late already.

I mean the gospel of John does take the time to explain where people and things are, the town of Bethany being some two miles away from Jerusalem, and earlier in the passage, Jesus staying somewhere along the Jordan River. I wonder how far Martha ran to meet him.

Funerals bring out the best and the worst in us. Death brings about the best and the worst in us. Grief brings out the best and the worst in us. I wonder if there's really much room for subtlety when dealing with death. For Martha, the answer is "no."

Her rawness, her grief-stricken words, her passion for her brother boiled as she went to meet Christ. And since we know that this moment of death and grief is going to bring out the best and the worst in Martha, we hear and join in her blurt: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This accusing, undignified moment in the life of Martha I imagine was bathed in anger, her words dripped with frustration, but that did not make it any less true nor did it make it any less shocking of a statement.

Because our writer, John, does not explain why Jesus stayed where he was, does not explain why, even though he loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, he stayed. Later in this passage, Jesus weeps over his dead friend's body, and it is confusing.

But then again, isn't it so true, that in matters of grief, in matters of death, ambiguity reigns king and it brings out the best and the worst in us.

There is much to grieve these days. On Friday, Pastor Matt and I walked the international bridge between Brownsville and Matamoros, Mexico. We walked with almost 100 faith leaders from the United States into Mexico, and saw tents lined up at the border. We went into a sparsely wooded area where people were trying

to find shade and hang their clothes to dry. A girl ran by who had just bathed in the Rio Grande, and after seeing the water, I instantly became concerned that she was going to get sick.

Brown eyes appeared from behind tents, staring at the collared pastors and ready to share their stories. I heard stories of violence and ransom. I heard stories of fear and fleeing. I heard stories of life and death. I listened until I started to hear dates like October 5, which was the date of one of these asylum seekers' hearings. I listened until I heard questions like, "What chance do I have of gaining asylum?" I listened until they started putting hope in people like me, an American, and then I joined their grief. I came and visited Martha and Mary, and these grieving women could not cry anymore. Their hope was dying, and they couldn't get ahold of Jesus. He was in another town and couldn't explain why he wasn't there.

I saw a pastor hold an umbrella over a Honduran woman and her sick toddler. There were tears in the pastor's eyes and she was trying not to let anyone see. The Honduran woman told us the water was contaminated, which had made the toddler sick. The toddler lay on her mother's shoulder, quiet and with only a diaper on. The heat was still and ever-present, and we could only bring the water that we could consume with us. Pastors started handing their own water bottles out. A few pastors ran to the 7-11 to get Gatorade, which was gone seconds after we put the box down.

I just kept looking for Jesus, and if I knew which direction I could have run to get to him, I would have. This tent city is what following the law looks like for asylum seekers. They have to wait in a tent city on the Mexican side of the border until dates like October 5. And we pastors who went now have resources to talk about why that is, but immigration law doesn't seem too sermon-like. This program, called Courts and Ports run by Texas Impact, allowed us the opportunity to learn about immigration policy and the stories from lawyers about their clients who are trying to legally seek asylum in America. In fact, after we spent hours going over immigration policies and the quickly changing rules for migrants, we were asked to break up into small groups and talk about what we had just heard.

And so quickly, my colleagues and I went to digging for hope. And we talked about the moment that we would be able to hug someone who was broken or touch the arm of one of these hurting people or pray over the tent city...

My friend's words still ring in my ears, "But they are still there."

And they are. Staring at a wall. Look backward at their home countries filled with violence and ransom. It is this liminal space, this in-between space, where we were, a space that stands between life and death. It is ambiguous and when we got there, it was so quiet. It seemed like tears were a luxury or maybe they don't fall in the heavy silence of not knowing what is next.

We like to clean up ambiguity. We like to make sense out of things, so I struggle with sneaky Jesus when talking with an asylum-seeker. I struggle to not be able to make sense out of their situation, but there's no one to complain to in flesh and bone. There is only sneaky Jesus, who moves by the will of God. We believe that God is here, and God can take our complaints and hurts and fears.

And so, on Sundays, coming to the font, we stand also with Martha, who brings her worst self-blurting out where Jesus should have been but wasn't. And a few moments later, we find her offering her best self. Out of the love that Christ has for her, she is able to see him for who he is. And with the confidence of the children of God she confesses: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Because confession is not only about what we have done wrong but acknowledging that God is present. In the midst of grief, in the midst of ambiguity, Martha is able to acknowledge where Christ stands, where her hope is placed. And that movement of confession, recognizing our dependence on God, is a

constant movement to remind us that we are not in charge, but we are charged to carry out hope into a world bathed in grief.

I admit that I needed to turn off the grief in the tent city. I recognize that is a privilege for me. I had my passport and could walk across that border any time I wanted. I just would not be lost to despair. We could stop all confession at the point where we say that we are broken. It is no less true. We could sit in our brokenness in the prayer of confession, but it is miserable. We keep going. We continue in our services, and quickly, we turn our attention to the Time with the Younger Church. And in Matamoros, I did too. I waved at a little girl and asked her how old she was. She told me 6. I told her she was beautiful. I waved at her brother, and his sister told me he was four. I told her she was a good sister and told them both that they were strong. A priest brought a guitar and began to play. And the children started to dance. I could only stand there and watch. I couldn't yet find my feet dancing, but I watched them. I touched the forehead of a four-month old in a purple t-shirt and told her mother her baby has beautiful eyes. These children had flip-flops caked in dirt, and their curiosity shone behind their eyes. They danced when it seemed inappropriate, but we needed them to. We needed them to lead the Act of Praise when we forgot the words.

I wanted to scream at sneaky Jesus on Friday. But I recognize that representatives of my voice in this country have created these border issues. I am complicit in the laws that keep people staring at a wall. And that confession is important to say. This piece of truth-telling is pivotal for change. But as the people of God, we cannot stop there. If I stay that complicit and in despair, nothing's going to happen. If we stay bathed in grief, we cannot move forward. We can yell at Jesus, but eventually, our confession is: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." And that changes who we are. We are not a people of complacency, but a people called to the broken parts of the body of Christ. And I bear witness to you today that children are dancing in those broken parts in order to give us hope, but they are still there.

The border is a space in-between, like the font. A place of life and death, a place where we see our true colors. A place where the powerless are seeking someone to change something. And yes, Jesus is frustrating because half the time, we don't know quite where he is. In the midst of suffering, we seem to lose him in the crowd. But those kids seemed to understand something that we didn't. You dance when the song is played.

And you gather together to make change. You circle the wagons when you feel like you're about to get hit. You pull the community in close so that the voice is louder so that there is more support. Our voice needs to be louder so that everyone can join in the dance. Our reform needs to be broader so that waiting is not a fearful place but a hopeful one. People of God, if our Christ, confusing though he may be, was a voice to the voiceless, then we need to be that to. Confession is all about truth-telling, and we have an obligation to radical hospitality. And we need each other to do all of that. But I tell you that if you are lost in despair, if you cannot find your way, Christ lives in the children. And our Christ claims that all of God's children are welcome here. And in that place know that you are beautiful, and you are strong, and it's time to be changed. Because they are still there.

In the name of the Christ who is ever-present and will confound and reveal as God wills, Amen