

The God Who Listens, Loves and Heals

Meditation on John 11 (selected verses)

April 2, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was... ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha 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.'²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see

the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'"

I visited Betty at a local hospital on Wednesday. Betty, who turns 95 at the end of April, greeted me with a smile. "Oh, it's you!" she said, trying to think of my name. "Pastor Karen! My daughter said you might come."

I had planned a week earlier to see her at the rehab center on Merritt Island that has been her home for several months. But B.J., her daughter, called and told me she was in the hospital, again. Last fall, Betty broke her hip and needed surgery, then rehab. She couldn't go back to her apartment in the senior living community where she had lived. She needed more care.

This hospital visit was for blood transfusions and tests. She expected to stay one night and a day. She ended up staying 4 or 5 days. And she wasn't sure why. She shared her frustration with me. At least at the rehab center, she could get up and walk around with her walker. At the hospital, she was stuck in bed all day. And the food! I listened sympathetically as she told me about her breakfast that morning. Usually, she loves breakfast. But the hospital served her cold chicken broth, jello and lemon ice.

"What kind of a breakfast is that?" she asked, making a face. I laughed. It wasn't anything I wanted to eat for breakfast, either.

I listened as she shared about her illness and her family--children, grandchildren-- and reminisced about her younger days, when her

husband was still alive. He died when he was just 60 years old. When the conversation might lag, I would ask another question that would stir another story. Does that happen when you visit someone in the hospital or nursing home? And I would listen again, keeping my heart and mind open to hearing not just the words, but the heart behind the words. She seemed lonely and a bit scared. She needed to know that someone was listening. That someone cared.

When I visit people who are sick or grieving, I come with the Spirit of Christ inside of me to witness to our God who always listens, loves, and desires to heal us-- so that others might come to believe on Jesus our Messiah, who died for our sins.

Those trained in Stephen Ministry -- a lay ministry in 12,000 congregations and 170 Christian denominations in the U.S., Canada, and 29 other countries-- have learned about our *listening, loving, healing* God as they are stirred to listen with their hearts. We have 12 Stephen Ministers (women and men) in our congregation! They have completed at least 50 hours of training through a partnership with Grace United Methodist Church on Merritt Island. If you are interested in training to be a Stephen Minister or if you are in need of a sister or brother in Christ to walk beside you through a personal crisis, such as a serious illness or the death of a loved one, let me know. During the Stephen Ministry training, those who seek to serve the Lord with their gifts of compassion and love learn how in Exodus 2:23-24, God hears the “groaning” of the Israelites held captive in Egypt and remembers God’s covenant with them. How in Exodus 16:12, God hears the grumbling of the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, and responds with grace.

How in Psalm 66:19, the psalmist sings, “God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.” God even hears our unspoken concerns! In Isaiah 65:24, the Lord God says, “Before they call, I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear.” Stephen Ministers study our gospel reading in John today, when Jesus, standing before Lazarus’ tomb, looks up and says, “Father I thank you that *you have heard me*. I knew that *you always hear me*, but I have said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe you have sent me.”

At my visit with Betty, as she talked about her illness and reminisced about her younger days, her daughter called. Betty answered the phone, told her daughter I was with her and asked me what I wanted to do.

“Why don’t I pray for you?” I asked, thinking she would call her back.

But she didn’t hang up. She set the receiver on the bed in between us, so her daughter could hear the words I would say-- and pray with us.

This was someone who believed in the God who listens, the God who loves, the God who desires to heal us!

Before Lazarus dies, his older sisters Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus, send word to the Lord that “the one whom you love is ill.” And Jesus, telling his disciples that the illness won’t lead to death, continues to minister across the Jordan River, where John had baptized, for 2 more days. “And many believed in him there,” says John 10:42. Then Jesus goes to Bethany. And what happens? Lazarus is already dead.

How do you think the disciples feel when they learn this? Sad. Confused. Disappointed in Jesus, who promised that “God and God’s

Son” would be glorified through the illness. Yet they don’t think it’s because Jesus doesn’t care. They know Jesus loves Lazarus--and so do we, for the phrase is repeated 3 times--in verses 3, 5 and 36, when he is crying at the tomb.

Martha tells Jesus in verse 21, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ But then, she still has a glimmer of hope. For Jesus has done miracles of healing before, including opening the eyes of the blind. “But even now I know,” she says in v. 22, “that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again. “I am the resurrection and the life,” he says in v. 25 and 26. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” He asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” And though Martha is overcome with grief, she clings to her faith. “Yes, Lord,” she says in v. 27. “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Then she goes and finds her sister, Mary, who is grieving at home with her community, and sends her to speak with Jesus. Mary, in v. 32, goes to him and kneels at his feet--a sign of respect, submission, and humility, despite her disappointment and grief. “Lord,” she says, echoing Martha’s words, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” This act of kneeling at Jesus’ feet in humility brings to mind what was mentioned in v. 2, foreshadowing what would happen in the next chapter, John 12. When Mary takes a “pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume” and pours it on Jesus’ feet. Then she wipes his feet with her hair. And the house is filled with the fragrance used to anoint the dead.

Now Jesus listens to Mary, sees her crying and is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” For the Lord cares about our grief and suffering. He grieves and suffers with us! He is the God who listens, loves, and desires our healing. Friends, do you believe in the Messiah? The Son of God, the one who is coming again to gather His Church? The one who lives in the heart of every Christian to bring us comfort, hope and strength for every day?

Jesus orders the stone to be removed from the tomb, though Lazarus has been dead 4 days and the stench of death has already set in. He prays aloud and cries out with a shout, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man appears, hands and feet still bound with cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. “Unbind him,” Jesus says, “and let him go.”

The raising of Lazarus would lead many to believe in Jesus the Messiah that day. But others would tell the Pharisees, who feared that more Jews would come to believe. And the Romans would come and destroy their holy place and nation. The high priest, Caiaphas, prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

From that day on, they planned to put Jesus to death.

Let us pray.

Holy One, we thank you for sending Jesus, our Messiah, your Son, to take away the sins of the world so that we might be reconciled with you. Thank you for being the God who hears our prayers, and grieves when

we grieve, suffers whenever we are suffer. Thank you for being the God who loves us unconditionally, though we have done nothing to deserve this love. Thank you for your desire to heal us of all our diseases and make us whole and for your Spirit that lives within us, comforting us and strengthening us to do your will each day. Help us, Lord, to really listen for your voice and obey. Stir us to truly love and serve one another and share one another's burdens and pain. And bless our Stephen Ministers as they seek to serve the Church with their gifts of compassion and love. And bless the children, Lord, participating in our Kids Klub program and the staff and volunteers who guide and care for them, nourishing them in the faith and Word of God, urging them to be their very best selves and, at the same time, loving them just as they are. Bless the families with peace and a deepening sense of your presence as you draw them closer to you. In Christ we pray. Amen.