

Asthenes: A Family Story

John 11:38-44

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on March 9, 2008, the Fifth Sunday of Lent at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

John 11:38-44

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus 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 four days." 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 looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I 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." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is one of the longest and most dramatic stories in the Bible.

- It is home to some of the most familiar verses in the Bible:
 - "Jesus wept"¹
 - "I am the resurrection and the life"²
 - "Lazarus, come out!"³
 - "Loose him, and let him go."⁴
- Lazarus is one of two individuals of whom it is said directly, "Jesus loved."⁵
- And the raising of Lazarus is the event in John's Gospel that leads Jesus' opponents to begin to plot his death.⁶

In preaching this story, I want to take a page from Patrick's playbook last week and preach "one thing" about this story. The one thing is a possibility raised in a book written by a French Roman Catholic scholar, Jean Vanier, that Lazarus was not simply an ordinary human being who became ill and died, but rather was a person who had a significant, perhaps lifelong, disability.⁷

Vanier makes this case on several fronts.

- First, the story opens with these words: "Now a certain man was ill..." The Greek word for ill is *asthenes*. In addition to being translated "ill," *asthenes* can also mean "without strength," "feeble," "insignificant." In the book of Acts, *asthenes* is the word used to describe both a crippled beggar and an invalid who seeks healing by the Pool of Bethzaba.⁸ Clearly, *asthenes* can describe a person with a disability.
- Second, in the appearances Lazarus makes in John's Gospel, Lazarus never speaks and is never described. Yet the story revolves around him. Lazarus is the center of his family life: unmarried himself, he lives with his two unmarried sisters who take care of him. Though Lazarus neither speaks nor acts, he is the one around which the life of his family, the story of his raising, and the tears of Christ revolve.

While there is no way to prove that Lazarus is disabled, it is clearly within the realm of possibility he is.

Operating on this assumption, I would like us to see what this story might teach us about those who care for the Lazarus's of the world; and in turn, what it might teach us about faith, even if such care is not part of our daily responsibility.

¹ John 11:35.

² John 11:25.

³ John 11:43.

⁴ John 11:44.

⁵ John 11:3.

⁶ John 11:53.

⁷ Jean Vanier, *Drawn Into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 196. Thanks to David Lewickki of The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar for raising this possibility in his paper on this passage of January 2008.

⁸ Acts 4:9 the word is used to describe "the crippled beggar"; in Acts 5:3 it describes the "invalid" by the pool of Bethzatha.

Let us pray: *Through those who need us, teach us of our need of you; through those whom you love in special ways, teach us to love. Amen.*

I.

One of the first sermons I preached was at a small, rural congregation about an hour outside Memphis. It had been decades since the church had had an installed pastor; as a seminary student home for the summer, I joined a long list of “guest preachers” of varying quality who were members of “The Anybody We Can Get To Show Up and Preach Society.” When I arrived at the church, my ’74 Mustang II was the third car in the parking lot. An elder greeted me, showed me where I would sit, and handed me my honorarium -- \$25. By the time the service began there were fifteen people present, including the elder, myself, and the organist who played “Amazing Grace” in a way that made me think she played it every Sunday.

Among the twelve people seated in the congregation was a family on the first row. A man in his early forties, blue suit and tie; a woman next to him, yellow print dress. A daughter about eight, blonde hair, white dress, marking a coloring book; and a son, an early teenager, thin black tie; white shirt, black pants, lying in a wheelchair-type bed, quiet, the entire service.

At the door after the service, this family thanked me for the sermon, and introduced me to their son, Marshall, who stared beyond me with glassy eyes. The elder who had greeted me whispered in my ear: “They are here every Sunday.” Driving home, I wondered if the church was kept open by its few remaining members for the benefit of Marshall and his family.

In the years since that sermon, I have served four congregations. In each there has been at least one family with a severely disabled member – child/teenager – who come nearly every week. Among the things I have learned from watching these families is that, like Lazarus’s sisters Mary and Martha, the life of the family revolves around the one disabled member at its center.

**

Sarah Dale was in the sixth grade when I went accepted the call to be Associate Pastor for Youth Ministries at the church her father served as Pastor. She was bright, chipper, outspoken; and she made her way around the halls of the church seated on a skateboard from which she pushed herself, her strong arms serving as oars. Her parents told me her condition was known as “brittle bones”; when she was born, every bone in her body had been broken. By the time I met her, she had had thirteen surgeries in thirteen years.

Like Marshall’s family in rural Tennessee, Sarah Dale’s parents were absolutely committed to her. She was the object of their time, their physical labor, their financial planning, their vehicle purchases and equipping, their decisions about school districts in which to live, their decisions about when to speak up and when to be silent, when to lobby, advocate, even agitate sports clubs, classroom teachers, school boards, even their youth minister, on behalf of their daughter.

Like the family of Lazarus, like Marshall’s family, the family of Sarah Dale revolved around her disability. The *Asthenes* in their midst defined who they were, what they did, how they loved.

II.

In addition to impacting the families into which they are born, the *Aesthenes* of our lives often have a significant impact on the faith of those who are around them. Sometimes it is the faith they elicit in others; sometimes, it is their own faith.

As many of you know, my wife recently completed the process of becoming a minister in the Presbyterian Church. As part of that process, in good Presbyterian fashion, she was required to write, several times, an account of her spiritual pilgrimage. What struck me in reading these various but similar accounts is that even though Maggie is a fourth generation Presbyterian minister or missionary, she cannot tell her religious pilgrimage without referring to her sister Judy.

Judy was a graduate student at Julliard; a professor of voice at the University of Illinois.

At age thirty, as a single mother of two pre-school daughters, she accepted a summer teaching and performing opportunity at Lake George, New York.

She asked her younger sister, Maggie, then in college, to accompany her to take care of her children.

In their cross-country trip from El Paso to upstate New York, Judy became severely ill. Within forty-eight hours, she underwent two surgeries in two days at Massachusetts General Hospital to remove a large tumor that had been found in her brain.

Judy survived the surgery, but her life became one slow march into disability. She once told Maggie that she preferred to walk in three-quarter time rather than four-four, because she felt her life was more of a waltz than a march. She died a few years ago, thirty years to the day following her surgery.

Even as Judy's body began to fail and her speech decline, Judy could still sing. Not the arias she learned at Julliard; not in the mezzo-soprano voice for which she had received awards and degrees. Rather, she began to put words of scripture to classical melodies she had sung at places like Wolf Trap and Tanglewood, melodies by which she would sing herself to sleep at night and dress by day.

In her statements of faith, Maggie cannot really describe how Judy acquired or kept such faith in the midst of her disability.

- She thinks it has to do with Judy's determination to live as full a life as possible.
- She thinks it has to do with Judy's acceptance of her physical limitations.
- She thinks it has to do with what both Lazarus and Judy received – a special love, a special affection, even a special weeping from Jesus Christ.

But Maggie is able to say that seeing the faith of Judy – watching it thrive even in the midst of illness – has been the strongest single influence on her own faith. Maybe this is what Jesus partially had in mind when he said of Lazarus: “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory...”⁹ Surrounded by the faith of *Asthenes*, my wife's own faith grew, and God was glorified.

III.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was restored to life, perhaps free from the disability he had previously known.¹⁰ Presumably, some years later, Lazarus died a second natural death not recorded in the Bible.

As fervently as the families of today's *Asthenes* hope and pray for similar miracle, most are realistic enough to assume that wheelchairs and breathing machines will be a permanent part of the family furniture. Therefore, armed with whatever faith they have forged, they carry on: lifting, bathing, feeding, changing, tossing balls – all in hopes of response. As they carry on, they hope, if not for a physical miracle in this life, at least for a few moments of joy in the present, such as Mary and Martha and Lazarus experienced when Lazarus came forth from the tomb.

**

While we do not know for a certainty that Lazarus had a disability, he certainly we bound. When Jesus had earlier said to Mary and Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he was defining “life” as he always did in the Gospel of John, as that which begins on earth and is fulfilled in heaven.

When Jesus, referring to Lazarus, says to Mary and Martha, “Loose him, and let him go,” Jesus was commanding that Lazarus be set from all that was binding him to reach the best life possible for him. “Loose him, and let him go.”

A sermon like this is difficult because it may barely speak to those of us who have little contact with the *Asthenes* of the world. We may think: “That's nice, but what does it say to me.”

It says this: The command “Loose him and let him go” remains in place for the most severely disabled among us. It remains in place for the *Asthenes* of the world. It also remains in place for those of us whose disabilities and bindings are not so public and visible. “Loose him, and let him go.” The best life possible; starting here, starting now.

Amen.

⁹ John 11:4.

¹⁰ John 12:1-8.