

Trinity Lutheran Church
Morris Plains, NJ

Bible Study

Fifth Sunday in Lent (A) – John 11:1-45

Discipleship: An Instrument of Understanding and Love

Focus Question: This week how might you be an instrument of God’s understanding and love?

Word of life

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’” John 11:25-26 (NRSV)

Read John 11:1-45

Grief often clouds reasoned thinking. Emotions can be overwhelming at the same time our mind tries desperately to bring order to the unsettling reality and finality of death. Understanding death is beyond our human grasp, especially when it comes prematurely to those we love. In this text, Martha and Mary grapple with the tardiness of Jesus. Word had been sent to him about the illness of Lazarus, but Jesus did not drop everything to come to their beloved brother. It made no sense to the sisters of Lazarus. Jesus healed so many, but why not help their brother?

1. What else might have Mary and Martha been feeling?
2. What questions might they have had?

Martha believes in the resurrection and the promise of new life, but does not fully understand the implications for her brother. She confesses, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. . . Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (John 11:24, 27 NRSV)

3. Rephrase Martha’s confession.
4. What might Martha have meant by her words?
5. What does it mean for you to believe in the resurrection?

Jesus is greatly disturbed by the time he gets to the tomb. Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus orders the removal of the stone, but there is concern about the stench. Martha is not denying her brother’s death, but understands not only his death, but the decomposition of his body. She understands it is too late to turn back death.

6. When Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away, what might have been going through the minds and hearts of Martha, Mary, and the crowd?
7. How much does Martha truly understand? Explain.

But Jesus has another plan. He understands the death of Lazarus will be used to glorify God and bring people to faith. In that respect, the delay by Jesus to respond to Lazarus might be understood as an act of love, so others might learn of a greater love.

Next Jesus offers a prayer as One who is unified with God. Although he prays for the sake of others, Jesus already knows his prayer will be answered because he knows God and God's will. Jesus says the word and new life is given. Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, come out!"

8. What would it have been like to be at the tomb on that day?
9. Imagine what Lazarus' life would be like after his resurrection?

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead is about the power of God, but also about the promise of new life. Despite much which we do not understand, let us trust in the actions of God through Jesus Christ to bring life and love.

Word among us

"You don't understand!" The words bellowed down the stairwell as 14-year-old Becky ran into her room in tears. This scene was becoming all too familiar at her home. Becky was right. Her parents did not understand the behavior of their daughter, but equally so, she did not understand her parents. They were at an impasse.

1. What might you suggest to the parents?
2. What might you suggest to Becky?
3. What have you learned about communication?

Understanding people is a challenge. In part, it is hard to understand our own actions. Paul writes, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Romans 7:15-16 NRSV) It is hard enough to understand ourselves and our own behavior let alone someone else. St Francis in his prayer suggests we pray, "Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love." In this prayer, we are encouraged to focus on the other person and not ourselves. We are urged to listen closely for the other's perspective.

4. What happens when we decide to try to understand the other's perspective?
5. What makes this difficult?

Mary and Martha thought they had an understanding of Jesus, but then their brother became ill. Jesus did not respond as they anticipated. Despite Mary and Martha having great faith and understanding, they were unprepared for Jesus to raise their brother from death. They were so caught up in their own grief and limited understanding that they could not see the big picture involving resurrection. Yet, no one had seen a dead man brought to life from the tomb of death. How could there be understanding? This was beyond the human grasp or imagination. The resurrection of Lazarus serves to prepare followers of Jesus for his own resurrection following the crucifixion and burial. But again, how can there be understanding in these first followers for something unique in human history and beyond human comprehension?

Hopefully, we with our limited understanding can join Martha and the faithful who lift their voices in confession, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (John 11:27 NRSV) We believe and we understand – even if our understanding is limited. Jesus proclaims to each of us who are shackled by the power of death and entombed by guilt and sin, "Unbind, you are free." We trust in the promise of new life. Thanks be to God.

6. What do you hope to understand about Jesus Christ?
7. What do you hope to understand about other people?

Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Grant that I may not seek to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. Amen

Dig Deeper

Psalm 121

Last word:

Pray each day this week:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Grant that I may not seek to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.