

John 11:1-16 – Divine Dawdling¹

Before the class: Prepare copies of the “Four Stories of Divine Dawdling” handout for the Information session.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin discussion, and to lead into the study)

The last funeral you attended - whose was it and how well did you know them?

Do you have a friend who would immediately drop everything to come to your aid if it was an emergency? Who?

Information

- Have a class member read John 11:1-16.

“This chapter has a number of surprises. First, we meet a set of persons with whom, we are told, Jesus was quite close: Mary of Bethany, his sister, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, highlighted here as Jesus’ beloved friend. Second, this family of siblings who live in the vicinity of Jerusalem is formed of parentless Judeans. And third, they appear rather well to do.”²

“When Lazarus becomes ill, his sisters send Jesus a simple message, ‘Lord, the one you love is ill.’ This intriguing reference to Lazarus not as ‘our brother’ or ‘Lazarus,’ but as ‘the one you love’ introduces him entirely in his relationship to Jesus, as the recipient of Jesus’ love and friendship. The sisters’ description may constitute a subtle rhetorical appeal to Jesus: if Jesus does indeed love Lazarus, then presumably he will respond to their request.”³

“To be shamed is not a good thing. Shameful situations are those that contribute to the breakdown of civilized community. One example is an unneighborly wedding celebration (where wine runs out). Another is an unsatisfying death (being buried without key friends in attendance).”⁴

“It is likely that Lazarus of Bethany was a marriageable young man who died. Given the economic and social position of unattached (we are given this impression) women in antiquity,

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² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 193.

³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 240.

⁴ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 194.

his loss would have been a terrible blow. He would have been the supporting male in their lives, even when he is married. He would be their social security.”⁵

But Jesus does not respond to their request. Although Jesus has the power to heal, even from a great distance, Jesus does not heal, in this case. And even though Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, he doesn’t drop everything and rush to their home which was approximately two miles from where he stood. It’s not even like Jesus has a lot going on at this time.

“That Jesus dawdled and missed the funeral would look like a dishonor to the Bethany family and may account for a certain testiness in Martha’s initial words to Jesus in v.21[and Mary in v. 32, ‘If you had been here, my brother would not have died.’].”⁶

As Christians, we say we follow Jesus. However, sometimes Jesus does things that confuse us. Why do you think Jesus treated his dear friends in this way?

“In this Gospel, Jesus takes the initiative to help those whom he believes need his help (in the Synoptics, by contrast, he normally does nothing unless he is asked to do so). He is rarely approached for help by others in John. Yet, in those few instances when people do in fact make requests, as here, Jesus’ response is always one of delaying reluctance, followed by compliance, and then a return to the conflict with the hostile Judeans.”⁷

There are four stories in John’s Gospel of people approaching Jesus for help. Let’s listen to these stories. As we listen, pay attention to the literary pattern:

1. A request for Jesus’ help.
 2. Stalling reluctance on Jesus’ part (the divine dawdling)
 3. Jesus complies with the request
 4. Continued conflict with the Judeans
- Have a class member read John 2:1-14.
 - Have a class member read John 4:46-5:1, 18.
 - Have a class member read John 7:2-10.
 - Distribute the handout, “Four Stories of Divine Dawdling.”⁸

⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 195.

⁶ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 195.

⁷ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 67.

⁸ This chart is from Malina and Rohrbaugh, 68.

[Give time for class members to read through this chart.]

Who are the people who request Jesus' aid? (his mother, a political authority, his brothers) All of these are persons who Jesus should act for.

Why is there a divine dawdle?

In each of these stories, Jesus eventually does address the request. Why?

“Jesus' delay and his reference to God's glory (v.4) again emphasize that his actions are not coerced: Jesus acts in his own time and in order to bring glory to God.”⁹

We want what we want and we want things to happen when we want them to happen. This includes life itself. We want life to continue (especially when there is wealth and health). Death is never welcomed by happy, healthy persons. Yet all humans, including Jesus, must die in one way or another and on a mysterious time scale that we cannot control.

Why does a good God (or a good person) permit death? Notice the question asked by the onlookers in verse 37.

- Have a class member read John 11:37.

“This is facing one of the great problems of those who believe in a life-giving God of love who yet lets people die. The thrust of this chapter's response to that problem is to face the harsh facts of illness, death, and decomposition, and do justice to the realities of loss, grief, and anger, while trusting that they do not have the last word...Jesus himself does not avoid grief, danger, suffering, and death, but offers a life that has come through them and sustains others through them.”¹⁰

Transformational Exercise

- Have a class member read John 11:9-10.

“In sum, Jesus maintains that, for him, it is still daylight, even if the hours of night are pressing - and that even those hours of darkness, real as they are, are not a genuine threat to the true light. God's work can and will continue in spite of the darkness.”¹¹

⁹ Thompson, 241.

¹⁰ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 218.

¹¹ Thompson, 242.

“The disciples think that, since Lazarus is sleeping, he is past the crisis and is on the mend. But Jesus clarifies his meaning: Lazarus has died. There can be no expectation of ‘improvement’ or ‘natural recovery.’ What is true for Lazarus will also be true for Jesus and for all his followers threatened by death: there is no ‘natural recovery’ from death. The dead will live again, not by their own power, but by the intervention of the one who created and sustains all life.”¹²

The death of a significant friend, family member, or mentor makes us pause to reflect on the meaning of life and on the hope of eternal life. Although there is no denying that the loved one is “dead and gone,” there is a sense in which the life of our loved one lives on through us.

As we pray silently, thank God for something that remains in you - a gift from your now-deceased loved one. [Pause] Now, thank God that God’s grace has received your loved one into God’s eternal Light and Love. Amen.

¹² Thompson, 242.