
A question of worth

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

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John 11:1-45

Now, there was a sick man by the name of Lazarus. He was from Bethany the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with oil and wiped his feet dry with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was ill. So the sisters sent to Jesus saying, "Lord, look, your dear friend is sick." When Jesus heard this he said, "This sickness is not fatal. Rather, it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed two more days where he was.

Then, after this, he said to the disciples, "Let us go again to Judea." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews are now seeking to stone you. Are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? If anyone walks during the day, that person does not stumble. [People who walk in daylight] see the light of this world. But if someone walks at night, that person stumbles, because the daylight is not there for him." He said these things and then, afterwards, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. But, I am going that I might awaken him." So, the disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be alright."¹ Jesus was speaking about Lazarus's death, but they thought that he was talking about the rest that one enjoys during sleep. So, Jesus then said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. And I rejoice for your sakes, so that you may believe. This is why I was not there. But, come, let us go to him." Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us go so that we, too, may die (there) with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away.² Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. So, when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But, I now know that God will give to you whatever you ask of God." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will be raised." Martha said to him, "I know that he will be raised in the resurrection of the last day." Jesus said to her, "I AM is the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies. Those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I believe: You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called secretly to her sister Mary saying, "The Teacher is here. He is calling you." When Mary heard it, she immediately arose and came to him. Jesus had not yet come to the village. He was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with Mary in the house comforting her saw Mary suddenly arise and go out, they followed her. They thought that she

¹ The word "alright" translates the Greek word *sozo*, most often translated elsewhere as "to save".

² Literally, "15 stadia" away.

was going to the tomb so that she could weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was, she saw him, fell at his feet, and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her weeping as well, he was deeply upset and trembled. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews began to say, “See what a dear friend he was to him.” But, some of them said, “Couldn’t he who opened the eyes of the blind man not have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again deeply upset, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and there was a stone lying on it. Jesus said, “Lift away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, it already stinks, for it has been four days.” Jesus said to her, “Didn’t I tell you: if you believe, you will see God’s glory?” So they lifted away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd that is standing around so that they may believe that you have sent me.” Having said this, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Release him, and let him go on his way.” So, many of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary, when they saw what Jesus did, believed in him. (John 11:1-45 Translation LGB)

I discovered something very disturbing the other day. This doesn't happen to me very often. I live a quiet life. I mind my own business, for the most part.

But, the other day, I suddenly discovered how much I was worth.

How much do you think it was?

\$4.50!

Can you imagine? It turns out that I'm only worth a cup of coffee at Starbucks, barely!

Well, better said: that's what I found that my body's worth. Apparently if you take all the elements in my body and boil them down to their elements, I have \$1.00's worth of precious metals. Then, if I add the skin of my body, which is apparently the most valuable, let's see, that's another \$3.50.³ So, yup, \$4.50 in total.

Of course, this value also depends on stock market fluctuations: how much is magnesium worth today, for example? Maybe I'm only worth \$4.39 today!

Of course, you can also play with this figure: if you sell body parts, you can also ramp up the amount you're worth by quite a bit, but I don't recommend that approach.

There are a lot of people out there, who don't believe we are more than the elements that make up our bodies and the electrical pathways in our brains and nerves. They were probably hoping for more, but, too bad, that's it. They really shouldn't have hoped for any more.

What about the people sitting next to you? Go ahead, take a look: what is the person sitting next to you worth? \$4.50? A little bit more? A little bit less?

The famous -- my friends would say, "infamous" -- Princeton philosopher, Peter Singer, says that only fully competent adults are worth anything at all. In contrast, infants, the mentally challenged whose mental skills will never be more than a child's, seniors... these are all worth less even than some animals, he says.⁴ So, they're not even worth \$4.50.

OK, that's extreme, you might say. But, what about you? Are you worth as much as, say, one of the Sens hockey players? Are you worth as much as, say, a famous entertainer, say, Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie?

How much are you worth?

Well, believe it or not, this morning's Gospel reading helps to answer that question. John 11, a play in 5 acts. (These Gospel readings from John are getting longer and longer, aren't they?!)

³ See <http://www.coolquiz.com/trivia/explain/docs/worth.asp>

⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, *Neither Beast Nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 6.

Act 1: News comes to Jesus

You know what's happening.

Now, there was a sick man by the name of Lazarus. He was from Bethany the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with oil and wiped his feet dry with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was ill. So the sisters sent to Jesus saying, "Lord, look, your dear friend is sick." When Jesus heard this he said, "This sickness is not fatal. Rather, it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So far so good.

And yet.... Take a look at verse 6: *So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed two more days where he was.*

Huh? If Lazarus was worth anything, or even if Lazarus was worth something in Jesus' eyes, surely Jesus would run to save him, right?

Let's assume you're in a bad way. You call on Fr. David or Pastor Paul. If either one does not come running immediately, you say: What are we paying these people to do??

But, imagine if later Fr. David or Pastor Paul explains to you: You know how much I love you. You know how much you're worth ... so, when I heard you were sick, I didn't come to visit you.

Your obvious answer to this should be: Huh? I don't get it.

As with the case of the man born blind -- we heard about him last week -- Lazarus's sickness is not because he, or his parents, or his sisters have sinned. Rather, Jesus says here as he had to his disciples about the blind man: this is an opportunity for the manifestation of God's glory.

Now, if I had been poor Lazarus at this point I would probably have said: Uhm, could you please just heal me and choose someone else on whom to manifest your glory?

Isn't that the way that most of us want it? I know what I need; just get on with it and heal me.

But, if we keep our eyes on Jesus here, what we learn is that God's response to someone in need is not necessarily to answer that person's immediate need or even the plea of others for that person. The proper response is to ask God: "what do you want me to do in this situation that will reveal your glory?"

Someone can only have faith to do this who believes that if we are worth anything at all to God, God is not going to fail us.

In fact, as with Lazarus, he is going to do something incredible that no one could have asked or imagined.

Act 2: Jesus communicates the news to his disciples

But, first, it gets worse: Jesus confuses his own students.

Then, after this, he said to the disciples, "Let us go again to Judea." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews are now seeking to stone you. Are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? If anyone walks during the day, that person does not stumble. [People who walk in daylight] see the light of this world. But if someone walks at night, that person stumbles, because the daylight is not there for him." He said these things and then, afterwards, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. But, I am going that I might awaken him." So, the disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be alright." Jesus was speaking about Lazarus's death, but they thought that he was talking about the rest that one enjoys during sleep. So, Jesus then said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. And I rejoice for your sakes, so that you may believe. This is why I was not there. But, come, let us go to him." Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us go so that we, too, may die (there) with him."

My friends, especially those of you who are going to be confirmed this Easter, I wish that I could tell you that for Jesus' disciples, those who want to learn from Jesus how to know God, that listening to God is easy, and that the ways of God are completely straightforward, and that all you have to do is follow instructions.

But I can't.

The ways of God are anything but clear, and unfortunately, God seems to have a regular custom of making sure that they are not clear.

Why? Why does he not make His ways clearer to us? Why does Jesus allow his disciples that he has gathered around him to get it so wrong?

Here's a hint: Jesus is actually teaching his disciples something clear and something that really matters. It is this: what really matters is that they keep their eyes on him, rather than on their preconceived notions about what he should do.

The disciples' normal response to Jesus is: Lord, we know best what you should do.

Really? And what would that be?

Well, let me and those I love live out my life and their lives in peace, quiet, and good health.

Really? And then you'll just die.

Well, yes.

That's it?

No. Jesus wants his disciples to keep their eyes on Him because He has much more for them than this, more than they can ask or imagine.

He has even more than the Bible has led the Pharisees to expect. Remember: the Pharisees knew their Bible inside out. Why, many of them had even memorized it! And yet they completely missed the point because though they had eyes, and could even read Scripture, they were completely blind to Jesus. They couldn't keep their eyes on Jesus. Why, they couldn't even see who he was!

So, even though the disciples didn't know what they were getting themselves into, at the very least they had learned to keep their eyes on Jesus and to follow him, even if they didn't fully understand what he was going to do or why.⁵

Act 3: Jesus encounters Lazarus's sister, Martha

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. Many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. So, when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But, I now know that God will give to you whatever you ask of God." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will be raised." Martha said to him, "I know that he will be raised in the resurrection of the last day." Jesus said to her, "I AM is the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even if he dies. Those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I believe: You are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

Martha is one of the privileged few in the Gospel of John to receive the revelation of God in the person of Jesus. The I AM statements that Jesus makes throughout John are made to a very limited number of people, most of them women or misguided crowds, rarely to the learned or the pious.

It is to her, not even to one of his male disciples, that Jesus makes the astonishing and clear revelation which, when translated correctly, is earth-shaking: "I AM is the resurrection and the life. And I AM that I AM."

What Jesus says to Martha is indeed earth-shattering: "Let me tell you who I am. I AM the one who revealed Himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Even before that, I was the one who revealed Himself to Abraham, who saw my day and rejoiced. I AM the one who makes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to live even today. For I AM, and in me there is both resurrection and life."

Do you get it?

Martha does get it, or at least in part. She actually gets it better than almost anyone in the Gospel of John. Certainly better than any of the disciples, except for the disciple whom Jesus loves.

But, like most people, for whom the point is just a bit beyond them, she grasps it briefly, and then, like a cloud it's gone.

⁵ Thomas's expression ("let us go with him to die") is probably a reference back to the fact that the Jews (i.e., the Jewish people most closely and religiously associated with Jerusalem as the heart of Judaea) were seeking to kill Jesus, and most likely all of those associated with Jesus.

Why do I say this? Well, if Martha had really understood what she said, namely, that Jesus was the Son of God, don't you think that she would have fallen at his feet dead like Isaiah, that would have fallen down prostrate at his feet like Moses, or even like those Roman troops sent out to arrest Jesus in the garden (John 18), who, at Jesus' word "I AM", fall to their faces like dead men.

But, her insight is gone just as soon as it had hit her. Not surprisingly, Martha is probably not entirely sure what she has just heard from Jesus or what she herself has just said.

So, like the Samaritan woman, whom we heard about 2 weeks ago, who says to Jesus: you stay right there, and I'm going to get the men of the village. Stay right there.

Martha says to Jesus... Let me go and get my sister. You stay right there. Maybe she'll understand what you're talking about.

Mary!!!!

Act 4: Jesus encounters Lazarus's other sister, Mary

When she had said this, she went and called secretly to her sister Mary saying , "The Teacher is here. He is calling you." When Mary heard it, she immediately arose and came to him. Jesus had not yet come to the village. He was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with Mary in the house comforting her saw Mary suddenly arise and go out, they followed her. They thought that she was going to the tomb so that she could weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was, she saw him, fell at his feet, and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her weeping as well, he was deeply upset and trembled. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews began to say, "See what a dear friend he was to him." But, some of them said, "Couldn't he who opened the eyes of the blind man not have kept this man from dying?"

Something about Mary causes Jesus to respond in a way that no one else in the Gospel of John causes him to respond. When Jesus sees Mary weeping, as well as the Jews with her, and when he then comes to Lazarus's grave-site, Jesus himself weeps.

Why?

Well, the crowds are quick to offer an answer: See how he loved Lazarus. That's why he's crying. Others concluded: See how frustrated he is at himself for not getting here in time. That's why he's crying.

But, as any reader of John's Gospel knows, what the crowds say about Jesus is almost never correct, at least not without saying more.

No. Jesus wept for another reason. He, the one through whom all of creation had come into being, wept because of what sin had made of God's good creation.

Here he stands before the fruits of that: death in all its ugliness, in all of its stench. Come and see it, Jesus, the crowds said to him. He was going to hear an echo of that in just over a week as they taunted him with the same as he hung from the cross.

Jesus wept because of what had happened to the immeasurably worthwhile creation of His Father. He might easily have asked: What have you done?

But, he didn't because he knew what humans had done. We had introduced a sickness into creation, a virus that was destroying all of creation.

And, there he was. He was weeping at the sight of something of so much worth having become so corrupted.

But, he was not weeping because he was powerless. He was in fact going to do something that the crowds could not even begin to imagine.

He had not come into this world simply to keep a sick man from dying.

The Word of God had not become flesh simply to open the eyes of a man born blind.

The author of creation did not take human form simply to restore a misfit Samaritan woman to a place of honour in her society.

The Son of God did not leave his heavenly throne simply to answer the ignorant questions of a Pharisaic theologian.

The Lord of glory had come to solve the problem besetting all of creation: death. "I have come to heal the sickness that causes death."

And so, here, in little Bethany, before a multitude of witnesses he gives them a foretaste of what is coming.

Act 5: Jesus encounters Lazarus!

Are you ready for it?

Then Jesus, again deeply upset, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and there was a stone lying on it. Jesus said, "Lift away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, it already stinks, for it has been four days." Jesus said to her, "Didn't I tell you: if you believe, you will see God's glory?" So they lifted away the stone. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd that is standing around so that they may believe that you have sent me." Having said this, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Release him, and let him go on his way." So, many of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary, when they saw what Jesus did, believed in him.

Right there at his body, the waters of death stopped. They were stopped at his word.

At the word of Jesus, the plague was stopped.

It stops right here, says Jesus, right here at my body -- which is worth a lot more than \$4.50 -- and it goes no further.

The end of the drama

What's going to happen next Sunday, Palm Sunday?

Next Sunday the whole drama will begin to conclude.

We will see that Jesus, a nobody who had appeared in the wilderness, but whose teaching and miracles had begun to gather huge crowds, is now being understood by the people as they one that they had long expected, the one who would fulfill their fondest dreams, they one who will finally give them what they want. Surely this is the Messiah, the one who will be like Moses and like David, a great military leader.

As Jesus, and his growing crowd of followers, draw near to Jerusalem, just days before the feast of Passover, they know that something big, something "glorious" is in the air. Can you feel it? This is it! They are singing Psalms of victory, throwing down their garments, cutting off palm fronds, to make their own "red carpet" to welcome God's own anointed king to the city of the king, to conquer the world and make Jerusalem the Jewish capital of the world.

As they make their way up the steep road to Jerusalem, the great fortress city, they know that Jesus will enter it, seize it, and begin to cleanse the earth of all impiety. It will start with the complete destruction of the Romans, who will not stand a chance when the Messiah begins to call down the armies of heaven to defeat them.⁶

My, how disappointed they will be next week!

Within days of next Sunday, the people of Jerusalem will realize that Jesus couldn't care less about destroying the Romans and all the other Gentiles. In fact, he appears more set on cleansing the Temple and Judaism! He will so anger the clergy of the Temple that they will even begin to seek His death!

Why, because within less than a week, Jesus will show the people that his real target is the restoration of God's glory, not through military conquest, but through opening the eyes of all the blind people everywhere to a God who from the beginning has loved the world that He has made, even though that world had always rejected him in favour of other treasures and other means of getting those treasures. He will show that it is his own people, especially those who ought to know God well, who are the most guilty.

And so those people will offer Judas a deal: Betray him for us. Then, Judas will reveal how much he thinks that Jesus is worth: 30 pieces of silver.

⁶ In fact, in the reading from Ezekiel 37, the valley likely holds the dry bones from dead soldiers of Israel, those who have been lost on the field of battle against some non-Israelite invader or in Israel's own civil war. It was a simple interpretation to see these bones once resurrected to life as a vision of the resurrection of Israel's army back to life, and thus of the warriors who will accompany the Messiah on his conquest. But, in the gospel it would actually be a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which there is no longer death, nor war, for they would no longer study war any more.

Interestingly, 30 pieces of silver is a lot more than \$4.50. It would have purchased a small farm. That's a lot more than \$4.50.

But, the religious leaders could have gotten a better deal, because in the end Jesus will not even be worth \$4.50, much less 30 pieces of silver. Even the poor clothes that he had worn at his trial will be taken from him and lots will be cast for them as he was taken to a cross as a criminal and crucified there. He will not even have enough money to purchase a burial site, were it not been for a man named Joseph.

In the end, the body of Jesus will be worth nothing.

Really?

Indeed, how foolish. But, how can we even calculate his worth. He is worth more than the whole universe. After all, He brought it all into being.

And yet, it is true that on the cross he will be worth nothing.

But, that is because the cross will reveal most clearly that when he "became flesh" he gave it all up, knowing exactly where it would end.

And he did it all for the sake of a Samaritan woman, a blind man, a Lazarus... even for you. He did it all because of how much He loves the world, the whole creation, that has become sick. And he has always loved the world.

That's what I found out this week, because that's what I found out about how much I'm really worth, and how much you're really worth... we're worth the death of the Son of God.

Oh, yes. Something's coming. The Jews were right.

But, what is it? Can you hear it coming? Can you smell it? It's almost here.

It's Easter morning.