June 10, 2010 If Only

John 11:1-45

God can change nobodies into somebodies . . . if only we can give up our “if onlys!” ☺ Many people consider the word “if” to be the weakest word in the Bible and the English language. This is the “if” which always looks backward with complaint, regret or blame. It is the “if” that we use as an excuse, not only for handicaps but also for sins and failures. “If I had known I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself,” points humorously to the possible demise at the end of our “if only” attitudes.

There are no boundaries or exceptions to the “if only” cry. Young or elderly, rich or poor, Anglo-American, Asian, African – it makes no difference. We have all “been there, done that” as the Mountain Dew commercial has taught us to say. “If only I had been born of different parents . . . .” “If only I had stricter, or less strict parents . . . .” “If only my parents had shown more affection . . . .” “If only I had been as smart as my brother or as pretty as my sister . . . .” “If only I had not been abused, or had an alcoholic family member . . . .” “If only I had married someone else . . . .” “If only I had gone to the doctor earlier . . . .” “If only I had changed the battery in the smoke detector . . . .” “If only I had saved more in our younger days . . . .” If only . . . if only . . . .”

There is such a thing as being a victim. A victim is a person who suffers some loss – physical, emotional or material – as a result of some act, condition or circumstance. In this imperfect, fallen and sinful world, no one can deny that many people lay legitimate claim to being victims. The Bible is filled with individuals, groups and even whole nations that could accurately be called victims. What we need to remember is that, although the Bible is filled with plenty of victims, it has NO PLACE for “if only”. The Bible stresses that there comes a time in the schedule of God’s healing and recovery process where we move beyond hurt to forgiveness, beyond wishful thinking to responsible action, beyond guilt or blame to belief. We move into the place where victims can and do become victorious!

“If” is also the strongest word in the Bible and English language when it is the forward looking “if” of faith. While the weak, backward looking “if” is destructive and paralyzing, the strong, believing “if” is a plug-in to the reservoir of God’s power.

The weak and strong “ifs” stand in sharp contrast in the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11. The first “if only” is spoken by Martha as she ran out on the road to meet Jesus before he even reaches Bethany.

This is Martha, over-eager and over-anxious. This is not the first time she has thrown an “if only” at Jesus. Remember his visit to Mary and Martha’s home (Luke 10:38-42). Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, listening and learning. Martha felt overburdened and confined to the kitchen when she confronted Jesus saying, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me.” In effect she was saying, “if only you cared enough about me, you would say something to Mary about this.”

Now, when Martha hears Jesus finally approaching, late it appears because he has stopped to help some beggar on the road, she runs out to meet him. “Lord, if (only) you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Actually if we count the days and distance Jesus already knew Lazarus was dead when the new reached him about his illness. There is a preliminary miracle here that gets overlooked.

But wait! There’s more. Jesus comforts Martha and she returns to the house to tell Mary that Jesus is asking for her too. Mary rushes to Jesus with the very same cry, “Lord, if (only) you had been here, my brother would not have died.” This should give *us* great comfort, for Mary is the one with the calmer, more rooted faith, yet her mind is in the same darkness of grief – “if only”. We are all in good company.

Jesus leads Mary and her mourners to the tomb and begins to weep. “See how he loved him!” they say. But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” Even some of the mourners have their “if only” two cents worth to put in. “If only” Jesus would have used his healing power on Lazarus, this whole death scene could have been avoided.

In a matter of minutes, Jesus counters their weak, hopeless chorus of “if onlys: with an entirely different kind of “if”. This new “if” is strong, hopeful and challenges them both to change the direction of both their present view and outlook to the future. Jesus tells the men to “take away the stone.” At the darkest moment of their reality, Martha reminds Jesus, “Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Jesus says, “Did I not tell you that *if* you believed, you would see the glory of God?” There they are, side by side, the weakest use of “if” and the strongest use of “if”, the most hopeless and the most hopeful, in sharp contrast.

Take a glance back to where Jesus receives the message that Lazarus is sick. (John 10:40 -11:6) Twice we are assured that Jesus loves Lazarus and his sisters. First we hear it in Mary and Martha’s request for Jesus to come home, “the one you *love* is sick.” The second is a note by John that “Jesus *loved* Martha, her sister and Lazarus.” Everyone thought Jesus cared! Do you hear the implied questioning of the injustice of this illness? There is a bite in their request, an unconscious expression of the age-old mystery – why? “Lord, we thought you loved Lazarus yet he is ill and we need you now. Why has this happened to one you love?”

How many times have *we* voiced the same question? It seems like love and suffering are incompatible, contradictory. How could this terrible thing happen to one you love? If God really loves us, why do bad things happen to us? If God is all powerful, why are there illness, tragedy and death? Does God care? Is God busy elsewhere or absent altogether? Our doubting and disbelief are *normal* reactions. It doesn’t necessarily signal a lack of faith, but a starting point to recognize that God is with us even in the darkest times.

Jesus already knew it was too late to be at Lazarus’ side at the moment of death. Some scholars imply he remained two more days so Lazarus’ death would be indisputable and the miracle all the more impressive. Jesus is not a 911 responder. When Jesus does return to Judea he makes reference to a time line. “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.” Everything in its own time and place. The disciples still have Jesus’ light with them. It is doubly fortuitous that they return now because Jesus can give them a preview of his power over death, death that he himself will be facing inn a matter of days now.

Nowhere in scripture are we given a strictly *philosophical* answer to unjust suffering. The fact that God loves us, and we love him, is not a fail-safe against tragedy. None of Jesus’ disciples died a natural death except John, and he died in exile on a lonely island. Jesus never promised us special immunity, but he did promise a special eminence – a place in his kingdom and his never-ending love. He never promised an answer – he promised himself, THEE answer. We cannot judge the degree of God’s love by whether or not life is treating us fairly. We cannot judge the degree of God’s love simply by our feelings because sometimes we *feel* horrible! There *will be* times when God seems to delay or seems absent altogether.

E. Stanley Jones used to say this about Christian suffering and the problem of evil: “God does not want us to just find the answer, he want us *to become* the answer.” That is what Jesus wanted for Mary, Martha and the disciples. He wanted them to be participants in the answer. This meant that Jesus would have to take them on a spiritual journey that would move them from blaming to believing. Jesus wants us *all* to move from blaming to believing. Because of Lazarus’ resurrection, Mary, Martha and the disciples would carry with them to the cross an image of Jesus’ power over death, despite their grief as they laid him in the tomb and their confusion over the terrible events of the crucifixion. If we allow the risen Christ to prove his power over death for us we can say with assurance: “Although we will not be at the end of our journey, we will be at the end of our wandering.” (Quote Leslie Weatherhead)

One of the most serious problems with “if only” is that it results in living in the past tense. To quote Whittier, “For all the sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, ‘it might have been.’” The past is unalterable, it cannot be changed. “If only” in the past tense wastes our energy, it permanently freezes life.

Jesus tried to get them to switch from their powerless past tense to his powerful present tense “if only you believe!” Martha had a glimmer of understanding when she said, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” She tries, but jumps ahead to the tense of eternal life. Of course Lazarus will rise again on the coming great resurrection day. But she aches for union with Lazarus today.

We *live* in the present. We say, “Someday . . . .” “I plan to . . . .” “I resolve to . . . .” “Tomorrow I will . . . .” These words can be *as* stagnating as the past tense “if only”. Jesus offers us one of the most precious and oft-quoted truths of scripture: **“I *am* the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me *will* live.”** Jesus is the great I am. He uses it six other times to describe himself. He startled the crowd by stating “Before Abraham was born, I am.” (John 8:58) NOW is the favorite Biblical time. Jesus wants everyone to fix their eyes on him, the Eternal – Present Tense – Contemporary – I AM. He asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” It was a quantum leap for Martha. All she could muster to say was, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was come into the world.”

Personalize this story. The great I am, God in Christ, totally identifying, understanding and hurting with us. Jesus promises he will not leave us “orphans”. “He will come to us” in the form of the Spirit. (John 14:15-21) The Holy Spirit exists for no other reason than to bring Christ alongside us at all times and to give all the glory only to Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the “paraklete,” which is Greek for “one called alongside.” If Christ had remained in human form he could not be present to all of us any more than he could be present to Lazarus at the moment of his death and on the shore of the Jordan at the same moment. Physical presence has physical limitations. The Holy Spirit, Christ with us in this present tense, is literally with us in the power of the moment. There need be no regret for what might have been or anticipation for what might be.

The answer too many of our own “if onlys” of blaming, clinging, longing, loathing, excusing, disobeying and wishing is the “if” of obedience and faith. When we are tempted to say . . . or hear ourselves say . . . “if only” we have the eternal presence of God in Christ with us with the Holy Spirit to transform the past tense to the present tense and discover ourselves VICTORIOUS!

“Trust and obey” as the old hymn would have us sing. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” The ultimate power of God *in us* is when we allow God to say *through* us “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . . for the saving of many lives.” Are we victims or victors? The choice is ours. It takes time to grow from victim to victor. Those who stood outside Lazarus’ tomb probably didn’t instantly understand Jesus’ present tense promise of life and victory. It takes reflection and awareness and a continuing exercise of trusting in God’s promise in Christ.