

**See How He Loved Them**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
**Commemoration of the Faithful Departed**  
**November 5, 2006**  
**Text: John 11:32-44**

My father died in the Fall. The first time I told that to my son he thought his grandfather had tripped on a shoe lace or lost his balance on a ladder. No, I gently said, he had a heart attack in November. I remember the trees were nearly bare, the clouds flat gray; rain beat against the window pane of the hospital waiting room like desperate tears. My siblings and I flew in from many points, to join our mother in the two week vigil from "incident" to death. You never knew my father. I can tell you he was noble and petty and goofy and wise; slightly bawdy and given to exaggeration. He had an annoying habit of trying to prove a point by saying "I knew this guy who..." He called me "Weegie" in front of my friends. He loved baseball and Lincoln and my mother and God. I sometimes hear his voice in a turn of phrase when I preach; I sometimes feel his blistering disapproval when I say or write or do something with which I know he would disagree.

Grief is at once universal and particular. The reality of death connects us to all humanity. Yet it can never be entirely collapsed into a generalization: this one death affects me as that one death affects you, in specific ways based on our unique relationship. I miss my father, just as I know that every person here is missing some beloved one who has died.

Our morning text begins with the loss of death. Jesus has been called to the bedside of his gravely-ill friend, Lazarus, whose sisters Mary and Martha are also among Jesus' friends. By the time he arrives, Lazarus has already died and been buried. Friends have gathered to pay their respects, and the household is in deep mourning. Listen for God's word to you in

the reading from the gospel according to John, in the eleventh chapter at the 32<sup>nd</sup> verse [p. 105, chapel/pew Bible].

[ John 11:32-44]

During my unforgettable visit to Ethiopia with Dan and Jane Reynolds, we visited in the home of a pastor whose wife had recently died. The Reynolds explained that it is the custom for the whole neighborhood to come and sit with the family members for several days. We arrived and the living room was already packed with relatives and friends, but even so we were warmly welcomed and seats were found for us. Food and drink were offered, quiet conversation was held, and a prayer was spoken, but most of the time the room was still, as members of the community simply sat, silently supporting the grieving with their presence.

Grief is a process that is ignored at our emotional and psychological peril. The rituals we practice around death—visitation, funeral or memorial service followed by a reception—even the time-honored tradition of taking a meal to the bereaved family—are meant to acknowledge the loss that is real, and to assist in the grieving process. Experts in this area warn not to short-circuit grief by trying to hold it in, or too quickly returning to “normal” life. Take time, they say, to feel: the sorrow and sense of loss particular to this person’s death.

How gracious it is then, that we have an example of this in Jesus! The One who came to bring life to the world did not blink back his tears at the grave of his friend. Jesus wept, for his friend who had died, for his friends who remained, for his own loss. He was “deeply moved”—and his weeping prompted others to recognize the love he had for Lazarus. In our own times of grief, draw spiritual strength from faith in a God who weeps with us. This God is not invulnerable to the limitations of mortality and does not abandon us in them. This is a God whose own heart breaks at the death of any of God’s beloved children, whose divine impulse is to comfort, to extend grace, to hold us closely in our sorrow. The God we worship is not a deity remote and high, secure in heaven’s glory, but One who

comes to us in that glorious, imperfect mixture of dust and light that is humanity.

Viewed one way, this story is troubling to contemplate when grief is fresh, because it ends so miraculously, as the dead man walks out of the grave at Jesus' command. We can't help echoing Mary's and Martha's reproach, "Why didn't you heal my brother/father/child?" And yet, I don't think Lazarus' dramatic resuscitation is the main point. After all, he would die again, sooner or later. The gospel writer has another purpose in telling this story, which is to say that the power of resurrection is exercised not through perfect, invulnerable strength, but in tears, in our very humanity, when words fails, when the illusion of our self-sufficiency falls away. The life that Jesus came to give doesn't deny the death that is our certain destiny; it overcomes its finality.

...Which is why the central symbol of Christian faith is a cross. We confess a crucified God, One who did not flinch from embracing the full measure of humanity, including death. But that is not the end of it. Death does not get the last word. Jesus came that we might have *life*. True life: the part that involves our beating heart and intaken breath that comes to an end, *and* the part that involves our soul unendingly alive with God. The cross is empty: as if to look death straight in the eye until death looks away, its fearsome power broken once and for all.

I was struck last Sunday as we baptized two babies, how very similar the blessings we extend to these little ones at the beginning of their lives are to the ones extended at the end of life. We give thanks and praise. We pray that they will know that they belong to God. And we promise as a church to nurture faith that will withstand the fiercest storm, the darkest night, the deepest loss. From life's edge to life's edge, from this world into the next, we are anchored by the eternal love of God known in Jesus Christ.

So we are able to release our loved ones into other arms, to let them go in the knowledge that they are held, as are we all, closely and forever by their Creator and Savior. Today we remember with gratitude these precious lives, and so many others we have loved. We may weep, even as Jesus wept at the grave of his friend. But let us also take comfort and courage in the promise of God:

*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. [Revelation 21:3,4] Amen.*

**Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**