

Death in the Family

sermon digest

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John 11:17-45

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Because the setting is in Knoxville, the 1958 Pulitzer Prize novel by James Agee, *A Death in the Family*, is somewhat familiar to most of us. Agee grew up in Knoxville. The novel is autobiographical, about the reflections of an adult looking back on the defining event of his life, his boyhood memories of the death of his father. There is a phone call from the drunk uncle. The boy's father is called out in the middle of the night because of the grandfather's heart attack, then, the phone call from a stranger in Powell. The boys' father was killed in an automobile accident on the way home. The family dynamics revolve around a grieving widow with two small children, a drunk uncle, taunting neighborhood children, economic fears, and finally a funeral by a pastor who refuses to conduct a full service for a nonbeliever.

James Agee died in 1955 at age forty-six before finishing his novel. His work was completed by a friend and published to provide support for his family. Although he was a credible screenwriter, Agee died with only modest recognition. His stormy life had involved marriage failures, and heavy smoking and drinking probably contributed to an early death. No one would have imagined his work to be Pulitzer Prize material. The novel was made into a play and then a movie, "All the Way Home." Agee's novel has become something of a classic in American literature.

Why? How could a story that had been put together from the literary scraps left by an alcoholic author become a prize-winning novel? Obviously it must have contained sufficient literary virtue to make the grade. However, it has recently been rewritten and republished from the original manuscripts by a UTK professor who claims that the prize-winning novel was not authentic.

Something about a real story is captivating, and the family dynamics interpreted through the eyes of a boy are somewhat familiar. Agee's novel is a commentary on the family trauma experienced in the death of a parent. Everyone who has been there recognizes the family dynamics and emotions at work, and just about everyone knows someone who has been there. Just as character is formed in relation to parents, siblings, extended family and friends, character is challenged and changed when a major player in the family is suddenly removed.

Everything changes when death comes to a family. I have been there personally. Last Wednesday was the anniversary of Mother's death. I should have been ready for the impact, but I was caught by surprise again. I recall the comment of a friend years ago at the death of her father, "His death leaves me as the elder in the family." Suddenly your role changes, and every family connection down the line has to adjust.

I have been there professionally. Nearly a half-century of experience in pastoral ministry has repeatedly led to deathbeds, hospitals, and funeral homes and put me in the middle of families struggling with the loss of a person around whom lives have been formed. Emotions are strong. Tensions rise sometimes erupting in conflict. Feelings of guilt and anger are not unusual. Siblings may draw closer to one another or create distance, depending on the issues and the family habits. One thing is certain; nothing is the same again.

The death of Lazarus is a death in a family. The language of affection implies that Lazarus, Martha and Mary are close enough to be family to Jesus. Like Agee's novel, elements in the story are familiar to anyone who has been there. Notice comes to Jesus on the road, "he whom you love is ill." The narrator observes that Jesus takes two more days with present business, "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." In the delay, Lazarus dies, and Jesus announces the decision to go immediately "to awaken him."

Martha goes out to meet Jesus with something of an accusation, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Mary is called, and the accusation is repeated. Although the culture is different and mourners are present, the common thread of pain connects us to this event. The women are weeping outside the tomb, and Jesus weeps with them, and observers note that the weeping of Jesus indicates his love for Lazarus.

In Fred Craddock's meditation on "Jesus wept" (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2000, p. 36) he observes that the pathos of Jesus seems to fit into just about any situation of grief or injustice that you can imagine except the one in which it is recorded. It is out of place because Jesus has expressed such

confidence that the death of Lazarus will be an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed. Yet, the weeping of Jesus is not out of place in families. Sometimes our weeping expresses the one common emotion that holds us together. But Craddock makes a very good point. Maybe this story is not as triumphal as John makes it appear on the surface.

In one of Paul's early letters 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 he notes the grief of early Christians over the death of the saints. Jesus was supposed to have returned before a generation had passed, and despair was setting in. The post-Easter depression is no joke. You can almost hear the accusation of early Christians as they continued the protest of Martha and Mary over the absence of Christ. Could it be that the Lazarus story is a message for families in grief?

When death comes to a family, does Jesus make a difference? The story of Lazarus is the seventh of seven signs. The signs were events of revelation demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ. In a real sense, the Lazarus story is more about Jesus than Lazarus. The story stands at dead center in the Gospel, a turning point that moves us toward the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The long story is anchored to two verses often cited in services of committal at cemeteries: "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?" (v 25-26) But that is exactly the problem! People of faith die, and their families and friends grieve just like Martha and Mary.

Significantly, the faith of Martha and the authority of Jesus over the power of death does not prevent death from visiting this family, just as the faith of early Christians in the power of God over the darkness of death did not prevent the death of their friends and family. Craddock sees the whole story as John's Gethsemane: "John records no agony in the garden, no scream on the cross. But here, with grieving friends at the tomb in Bethany, is the crisis." This is no frivolous tale about another miracle in the life of Jesus. It is a somber story about the deep grief of people of faith, even of Jesus, in the face of death.

Playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote "Lazarus Laughed" during the stormy religious turmoil of the mid-1920's. O'Neill never intended a serious interpretation of John's Gospel; however, his attempt at writing a Greek Mystery raised the question most asked by biblical scholars about Lazarus: after the story, what happened to Lazarus? O'Neill imagines a messianic character surrounded by wonder and awe. Beginning with family, friends and neighbors and finally with Tiberius Caesar and Caligula, everyone wants a report from the other side of death. Lazarus responds with laughter—a holy, contagious laughter—and declares that there is no death. The laughter of Lazarus is a particular threat to the Romans. Caesar controls the world by the fear of death. Finally, Tiberius demonstrates his authority and has the man he calls a demon executed by fire to prove that death is real and that even Lazarus must die. As Lazarus is dying, Tiberius pleads for a final word from the grave, and Lazarus speaks of, "God's eternal laughter."

The story of a death in this family is not funny. There is no laughing Lazarus to mock the powers of death in the rest of the Gospel. Instead there is this haunting word, "Jesus wept." The one who is the resurrection and life weeps with us at the tomb. When we have no clear answers and our Lazarus remains in the grave, our hope is in the loving God who in Christ weeps with us and whose tears give hope eternal.