

**"Being There"**  
**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**March 9, 2008**  
**Text: John 1:1-45**  
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Something happened to me a few years ago that I know could have happened to any number of you. I have mentioned to you before my friends, Real and Muff Musgrave. Real Musgrave is an artist whose work I have been collecting for thirty-five years. Muff is his wife, and the three of us have been friends since we were in college together.

Real's father, Dr. Albert Musgrave, suffered from Parkinson's disease for many years, forcing him into early retirement. He was a prominent geophysicist, and it was extremely sad to see such a brilliant and highly respected man suffer the loss of ability and dignity as a result of his debilitating condition. When Dr. Musgrave passed away, I saw his obituary in the paper and attended his funeral. A few days after the service, I received a note from Muff. It read as follows:

Dear David,

Thank you so much for coming to the funeral. Of all our friends, I just knew *you* would be there. We are all glad this day has finally come, but even so—we need our friends around us. Thank you.

Love,  
Muff and Real

"Of all our friends, I just knew *you* would be there." What would cause Muff to say that to me? It certainly is not because she and Real are lacking for friends. They have made friends all over the world,

friends with which they spend a lot more time each year than with me. Why was Muff convinced that I would be present at the funeral? Why was she so sure that I would be there for them at such a time of need?

I like to think that it may be because Muff and Real, who don't share the same faith commitment I have, nevertheless recognize that a component of what I understand Christian discipleship to be is a willingness to "be there" for them at such a time as the death of a loved one. Maybe that is what Muff was saying to me in her note. Maybe she realizes that in the life of a person of faith in Christ, there is going to be demonstrated a "presentness" to family members and friends that may not be demonstrated in everyone else's life. Maybe somehow or other Muff has discovered that *being of disciple of Jesus Christ means "being there" for one another in our times of need.*

We know that such was the case with Jesus himself. It is obvious from our Gospel lesson for this morning that Mary and Martha, the sisters of the gravely ill Lazarus, expect their friend to be there for their brother and for them in their time of need. When Lazarus gets sick, sick enough that he might die, his sisters send for Jesus. We know from the narrative that was read earlier just what it is Mary and Martha expect of Jesus, why they want him to "be there" for them. Both of the sisters express to Jesus the same comment, "Lord, if you *had* been here, my brother would not have died." Both sisters know that Jesus' presence, his "being there," holds a special significance. It would make a difference, cause a change in things, have an effect. And because he is the Lord, the difference he makes would be great. He would bring life out of death.

Although at first, the sisters assume Jesus is doing less than they expect of him, Jesus winds up doing more than they ever could have imagined. No he doesn't arrive in Bethany in time to prevent Lazarus from dying. The Lord doesn't always keep tragedies from occurring. However there is more than one way to sustain life. Jesus chooses to do things the hard way in this story by raising Lazarus from the dead in order to bring glory to God and in order to bring the disciples closer to faith. Jesus does what no one could have predicted: he calls Lazarus from the grave. So in the end, Jesus' "being there" does exactly what Mary and Martha desire: it sustains life.

All of us here, because we are followers of Jesus Christ, are called to be willing to "be there" for each other in times of need. All of us, at some time or other, are in need. Every one of us has gone through, is going through, or will go through a crisis of some kind. Crises come in all shapes and sizes but always bring about the same result—pain, suffering, grief, a sense of loss, loneliness, depression, anger, frustration, a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. No matter what the circumstances, when we know of a crisis involving someone we love, as persons of faith in Christ, we need to "be there" for that person. I think there are some things about our "being there" for each other in such times of need that we can learn from the story of Jesus' own "being there" for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

**"Being there" for people in need may mean not meeting their expectations.** Time and time again in the Gospels Jesus refuses to do what people expect of him. He is completely free of the need to live in order to please the crowd, and that is freedom indeed. When we are

willing to "be there" for each other, may we be clear about why we are there. It is for the same reason Jesus journeys to his friends' house. It is to glorify God and to help the people in crisis grow in their faith through the crisis. It is not necessarily to do what they want or expect of us; it is to do the will of God.

And do you know what? If we are willing to "be there" for each other out of a desire to please God and to promote faith, it frees us from the need to "fix" the problem. No matter what the crisis is, when we are "being there" in the Christian sense for someone in that crisis, it is not always to be a rescuer or an enabler. It is to point to God and to the resource of faith in God that can bring comfort and strength and maturity in any and all our circumstances. That's what our "being there" is for.

**And "being there" for someone may mean risk.** It was dangerous for Jesus to travel back to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus' home in Judea. It could have meant death for him and his disciples. The last time he had been there, at the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem (10:22-42), Jesus narrowly had escaped being stoned for saying that he was one with God. When Jesus gets ready to go in our story, therefore, the disciples suggest that Lazarus, whom Jesus describes as having fallen asleep, be left alone to wake up on his own. How sensitive and compassionate. So I think that Thomas' reply to Jesus' risky travel plans may be sarcastic. He may be saying, "Great, let's all go get killed, then."

Our "being there" for one another in times of need may not put us at risk to this extent. We probably won't get killed for it. But to be willing to be present whenever someone we love is experiencing a crisis

might risk our being criticized. As I am reminded from time to time, "No good deed goes unpunished." Living as we do in a culture that practices self-concern and self-absorption so religiously, to practice the love of your neighbor to the extent of being willing to "be there" for him or her may cause some around you to speculate as to your true motives. One of our children lost a job because he was willing to "be there" for a friend whose father had committed suicide.

Even Jesus was not exempt from being attacked in our story. Some of the people who were gathered at Lazarus' tomb said of Jesus, "You know, he gave sight to that guy who had been blind since birth, a guy he didn't even know. You'd think he could have kept this supposed best friend of his from dying." "Being there," like everything we do in following Jesus, opens us up to the possibility of attack. It's the risk we take to "be there" for each other.

**"Being there" for someone may even mean bringing life out of death.** I realize that none of us here this morning is Jesus, which means that none of us here this morning can raise someone from the grave. I know I can't, and if you can please let me know because I want you around when my father dies, something which is likely to take place a lot sooner than I am ready for it. But as I said earlier, there is more than one way to bring life out of death. "Being there" for each other represents life in the midst of death, life in spite of death, and life that ultimately triumphs over death.

When we truly are present for one another in our moments of pain and suffering it is a way of saying that life will go on, that there is life after death. Whether the death we are experiencing is the physical

death of a loved one, the death of a relationship through estrangement or divorce, the death of a career through termination, the death of a circle of friends through relocation, or even the death of some hope or dream that has been dashed—no matter what kind of death we are grieving, having our fellow Christians around us, their "being there" for us, breathes new life into the dry bones of our sorrow.

"Being there" for someone in need may not mean meeting their expectations, may mean some measure of risk, may even mean being able to bring life out of death to a certain extent. But "being there" for someone in need *always* means one thing: **"Being there" for someone always means love.** John the Gospel writer informs us at the beginning of the story that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. John probably feels he needs to state that upfront so we won't misunderstand Jesus' choosing to wait two days before going to visit them.

But notice that this first mention of Jesus' love for Lazarus is not the only one in the story. When Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus has been laid, Jesus begins to weep. He breaks down and cries. His sorrow and grief overcome him. He sheds tears for his friend who has died. And those around Jesus who see him weeping are prompted by his emotional response to the situation to say what about him? "See how he loved him!"

There is nothing that can express love like "being there." Nothing. Being present for another person when that person is experiencing a crisis says "I love you" like nothing else can. When you shed a tear right along with someone who is crying, there is no greater gift of love you can bring them. It speaks volumes about your care and concern. When you

hold the hand that is trembling from fear and doubt, a most precious gift of love indeed has been given. When you bring food to the one whose circumstances are so devastating that the idea of preparing a meal seems like an impossible task, you lovingly come bearing gifts that are appreciated beyond your ability to comprehend. "Being there" in such ways says, no shouts, "I love you" to someone at a time when it is most needed.

One of the many reasons why I know this is a truly Christian church is because I have seen you "be there" for one another. You know that being a follower of Jesus Christ means "being there" in the same way our Lord was for his friends. So my prayer this morning is not that you *start* "being there" for each other. You *already* are doing it day after day after day. Rather my prayer this morning is that you understand how important your "being there" is, how powerful your "being there" is, and how much you are acting like Christ himself when you are "being there" when someone you love is hurting and you make the effort to be right there beside him or her. May God continue to strengthen you, empower you, and bless you for "being there."