

"Friend"

John 11:1-45

Do you remember Mr. Hooper from Sesame Street? Chances are that if you or your children are under 40 years of age you probably don't. In the summer of 1981, Will Lee, the actor who played Mr. Hooper on Sesame Street, died. This posed a difficult set of issues for The Children's Television Workshop, producers of the show. Should they deal at all with the subject of death? If so, how would they explain it to their 10 million viewers, most of whom were under the age of six?

Child-development experts who specialized in loss and separation provided some specific don'ts for dealing with death on the show: Don't say Mr. Hooper got sick and died, because you don't always die when you get sick. Don't say he was old, because children think their parents are old. Don't say he went to the hospital and died, because people go to the hospital all the time. The staff also decided to avoid religious issues, such as saying that Mr. Hooper had gone to heaven.

What about the do's? Early on they decided they were going to say a few basic things. He's gone; acknowledge the reality. He won't be back. He'll be missed. They also wanted the cast to express how they felt about Will. And they wanted the kids to know that death stimulates a full range of emotions; you're sad, you're angry, you're frustrated, all at the same time.

The show that resulted aired on Thanksgiving so that parents could watch with their children. In one segment, Big Bird walks on camera and says to the cast: "I just drew pictures of all my grown-up friends on Sesame Street and I'm going to give them to you." He passed out sketches and the cast members oohed and aahed over the likenesses. He was then left with Mr. Hooper's picture. "I can't wait till he sees it," said Big Bird. "Say, where is he? I want to give it to him."

One cast member explained: "Big Bird, don't you remember? We told you . . . Mr. Hooper died. He's dead." Big Bird said, "Oh yeah, I remember. Well . . . I'll give it to him when he comes back." Another cast member got up from her chair and touched Big Bird saying, "Big Bird, Mr. Hooper's not coming back."

"Why not?" Big Bird asked innocently.

"Big Bird," she said, "when people die, they don't come back."

I was struck by that statement. Over the years since I saw that show, with my oldest daughter, Meghan, it has continued to stick with me; "They don't come back." Unless... unless they happen to be a friend of Jesus. That caveat is what struck me while rereading our Gospel lesson for this morning. That's what it is telling us. If you and I are a friend of Jesus, there will be much more to tell about us at our deaths than just that we're gone, and we won't be back. In this passage we hear Jesus himself tell us that great promise of the Gospel. "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." When death comes to a friend of Jesus, that friend is never just "dead and gone." That friend is instead resurrected, drawn up from the grave and made alive again to live in the joyous presence of God. Jesus' friendships with the key people in our passage tell us two very important things this morning. So, let's look into those friendships.

For the first thing we see is this: It's important to be a friend of Jesus. First, consider Lazarus. We read, "So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'" Lazarus is clearly Jesus' close friend, and as we soon discover, he is about to die. But he is also about to become the first to receive the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of resurrection because of that friendship.

With Holy Week and the celebration of our Lord's passion and

resurrection coming soon, it's a good time to say something here about the Resurrection. Interestingly, the Scriptures don't actually tell us a lot about it. They only tell us just enough for us to have faith that it will be ours in Christ Jesus. But there is one thing we do know from the Scriptures which may surprise you. Did you know that, as Christians, we technically don't believe in immortality; we believe in resurrection. Don't panic! Let me explain the difference.

The ancient Greeks believed that each human being possesses an immortal soul. At death that immortal soul flits off to be with eternity. From there the soul can, get recycled back into this life repackaged in a new body with a new personality. Classically speaking, that is immortality. But, the Biblical concept of human nature is not that we possess a soul, but that we ARE a soul. Consequently, when we die, we really die. Completely! But here is the good news: after we are dead God resurrects us. The difference is that it is not just a part of us that is raised, some small spark to be reembodyed with a different personality in a new life. That is why we have in the Nicene and Apostles Creeds that statement, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." That's not about our physical bodies, by the way. As Scripture makes clear, we will be a spiritual body. That statement in the creeds is affirming that when we are raised, who you and I are, is raised completely with our full being, mind, and personhood intact. The Resurrection means you and I will still be you and I.

The important thing to recognize is that, according to the Biblical view of resurrection, this new life that we receive in death is a gift from God. It is a gift offered without condition to friends of Jesus. Because of that friendship, you and I will have life beyond death. So, the first thing to see is this: It is important to be a friend of Jesus.

That leads us to the other thing to see: It is important to seek Jesus at all times and in all circumstances. Consider now Mary and Martha. Just

because we are friends of Jesus does not mean that we will not have to face tragedy and a broken heart. Such things are part of the ingredients of this life. We are not shielded from them.

Mary and Martha are the closest of friends with Jesus, yet death and tragedy visit them. Their reactions are instructive for us. Both of them say to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." It is a demanding statement. "Jesus, where were you when we needed you?" That's what they're really saying. "If you'd just gotten here in time, we wouldn't be having to suffer so." "How could you have let this happen?" Mary is so grieved that she won't even come out to tell Jesus what she's thinking. Lost in her grief, refusing to seek his consoling presence, she almost misses the miracle about to happen. She would have too, had Jesus not summoned her. Mary is angry and despairing and prefers to remain unconsolated in her grief.

Only Martha, never satisfied to just sit, comes seeking Jesus. And only Martha adds this one thought more, "Yet even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Martha still hopes. She is not lost in the despair that has taken her sister. Think of that; what a twist in the Mary and Martha story. Remember in Luke chapter 10? Martha bustles about, busy at her hostessing duties while Mary sits quietly at Jesus' feet listening to him speak. Typically, Martha gets a "bad press" for all her busyness in that part of their story. Mary's piety is what is praised there. This time, however, when things are not so good, when things are tragic, it is Martha who shines. She is not content to stay cloistered in her grief. She seeks Jesus out. She wants to understand. Seeing her faith, Jesus leads her deeper. "Your brother will rise again." says Jesus. Taking this for a cheap attempt at comfort, though no doubt well intended, Martha responds, "Yes, I know Jesus, someday we'll all be together again in the Resurrection, whenever that is." Can you hear it in her statement? "On the last day...but that's so far off. We've been hoping for the last day for a thousand years. I'm hurting now. What

about now?" Jesus fixes her in his gaze and says, "No Martha, I'm not talking about someday. I am the resurrection and the life who stands before you now. Those who believe in me, who are dead now will live, and those who live now and believe in me are never going to die." Jesus is saying that at his own resurrection, the faithful dead will be raised, and the faithful living from here on will not lie in death's cold grasp at all, but they will pass into new life at the moment of death. Martha in that moment, sees Jesus for all that he is, and confesses her faith. "Yes, you are the Messiah, the Son of God." In effect, she is saying, "I believe that the day of resurrection has come." Martha, even in her deepest grief, has been moved into deeper faith. Jesus is already beginning the miracle of new life in her. It is important to seek Jesus in our worst moments, even as we do in our best, most joyous.

Here is the Good News for you and me this morning: Jesus is the giver of new life; not only new life beyond the grave, but new life here and now. For some of us this new life now may be the chance to start over with our lives. For others of us new life now may mean new energy and courage to deal with burdens we are already carrying. The main thing is that new life is ours with Jesus, and in him life can become a wonderful thing again, no matter what our circumstances; that includes this time threatened by Pandemic, by death. Jesus gives new life. He gave it to Lazarus. But he also gave it to Martha, and even to despairing Mary, almost in spite of herself. Jesus is the resurrection and the life! It means that as his friends, neither life nor death will ever defeat you, for the One who raised Lazarus from the dead will give to you, to me, new life as well. Now, and for the life to come!