
1

Is God Fair?

Read John 11:1–45

It's not fair. Life, that is. Life is not fair.

So, where is God in that?

I've had some occasions to think just those thoughts. Maybe you have, too. One of those occasions came when I was just a child.

I was the new kid in the first-grade class at Louisville Academy, just starting to feel like I might actually fit in. Louisville sits in the midst of southern Georgia farmland. Fewer than two thousand people live there.

Not many people move into Louisville. The residents are not practiced at making strangers feel at home. Add to the townsfolk's wariness toward strangers that I was burdened with a profound speech impediment, and you'll understand why I struggled to belong.

One day we had a substitute teacher. The only thing that I remember from that class session is an art activity. I traced

a squirrel and then colored in the picture. All of us crowded around to tell the substitute about our drawing.

With all my classmates peering over my shoulder, the teacher asked me, “What is that?”

“A squirrel,” I said.

“What?”

“A squirrel.”

“Go sit down and come back when you learn to talk.”

I can still feel the blood rush to my face and the eyes of all my classmates staring at me. Lacking a soft palate, I was physically incapable of making the “s” sound. All the breath passed through my nose, and a sound emerged something like “Hwhwquirl.” The teacher’s words reminded me (and announced to my classmates) that where I came from and how I was made meant that I did not belong.

Life is not fair.

Where was God when I was born with a cleft palate, when my parents couldn’t afford to get it fixed, when that church-going lady told a deformed, vulnerable little boy to sit down and shut up because she couldn’t understand his distorted speech?

If you insist that God can be God only by preventing suffering and heartache, injustice and oppression, cruelty and indifference, then you are going to have a very difficult time finding God in this world.

But as it turns out, God does the very best work in the midst of the worst that this world throws at us. That’s one of the lessons we learn from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus arrives in Bethany after Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. Lazarus’s sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent for him while Lazarus was ill, but Jesus delayed in coming.

Martha and Mary each greet Jesus with the same words. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”¹

Maybe they simply meant, “If only you could have gotten here sooner, you could have healed Lazarus.”

1 John 11:21, 32.

Or maybe they were more accusatory in their grief: “What kept you? You should have been here. You could have saved him!”

In any event, Mary and Martha looked to Jesus to prevent a heartrending catastrophe. This is perfectly understandable. Mary and Martha loved their brother. As his health declined and his life seemed to be slipping away, they turned to God for help.

Like them, and like many of us, I’ve done precisely the same thing. I pray for a long list of people every day, many of whom are suffering from an intractable disease, facing surgery, or undergoing treatment.

I believe that God loves us and that God’s love is more than just an emotion. It’s a practice, a habitual way of acting toward the ones God loves. To say that God loves us, to say that God loves me, is to say that God wants the very best for me and is working actively to bring that good about all the time.

Some of us experience suffering and untimely death, disappointment, and hardship as a betrayal by God. For instance, in my prior life as a philosophy professor I had a student in one of my classes who grew angry and verbally abusive. We were discussing how to reconcile our concept of a good God with suffering in the world. When I asked him where his anger was coming from, he initially told me that he is a bishop’s son. (Well, that explained a lot.) Then he told me that his best friend had died in a car crash. His friend had suffered terribly before succumbing to his injuries.

My student said, “He didn’t have to die. God didn’t have to let him die. And even if he did, God didn’t have to let him die like that. If God was really all that good he could have let him just go to sleep. To drift on up to heaven without all that blood and pain.”

Life is not fair.

And if God’s love for us means that God will prevent bad things from happening to us and to the ones we love, then let’s face it. We can’t say that God loves us.

The story of Lazarus gives us a different perspective on God's love for us. Sometimes God does prevent suffering. Sometimes God relieves suffering. But most fundamentally, God's love transforms suffering and even death. If we look for God merely to prevent suffering in our lives, we're expecting entirely too little from God.

Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb. God does not stand at a safe distance from the changes and the chances, the emotional bruises, and the physical misery of this life. In Jesus, God jumps in with both feet.

While God's presence is comforting, Jesus enters our life to do more than go down with us on our sinking ship. Alternatively, we may expect Jesus to wave a magic wand and make it all go away. But that's not how it works either.

Jesus transforms our suffering, our sorrow, and even our death from the inside out. From heartbreak, Jesus creates a compassionate heart. From suffering, Jesus inspires hands that heal. And most crucially—definitive of who God is and what God is making of our lives—from death itself God brings a new kind of life. A life that has passed through suffering and death by the power of God. A life that is forever beyond want, agony, shame, loneliness, and death itself.

God is about more than comfort, safety, entertainment, and fun. God is about resurrection. Endless, boundless joy, tranquility, and belonging. God imparts a new kind of life in Jesus. And God is doing that already. Right now. Our relationship with God is transforming us.

Jesus delayed in coming to Bethany precisely because he loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Preventing Lazarus's death would have been only a temporary measure. After all, he would have died eventually in any event. God wants more for Lazarus than a few extra years. He wants eternal life. And he wants it right now, not just after Lazarus's biological life is over.

Jesus stood before the tomb and called Lazarus out of death into life. It is true that Lazarus would die again. But by raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus showed everybody present that

day—he shows you and me—that he is already imparting the eternal life that we will inhabit fully some day. Jesus is gradually speaking new life, a new kind of life, into his friends.

As we grow into this new life, we are drawn into God's mission of bringing new life from suffering and death. Remember, when Lazarus stumbles from the tomb, he is wrapped in death clothes from head to toe. Jesus tells his followers to unbind him.

Jesus gives new life. But this new life takes some getting used to. We need help from those around us. Somebody has to help us get rid of old death clothes that no longer suit us. And we can do that for others.

Whether those clothes are emotional habits, like old resentments and bitterness, or the social injustices, like payday loans and unjust wages, Jesus sends you and me into the world to unbind the friends he has already called from the tomb.

Let us return to that first-grade episode for just a moment. I returned to my seat lonely and aching. Little could I have known that God was already working in me what I could not do for myself.

Instead of letting me shrink into a tomb of my own making, God stirred up some courage in me that I cannot account for. I actually started speaking up more in class and on the playground. Being told to shut up, I discovered that I had something to say.

God instilled a love of writing in me. And the Holy One placed people in my life who nurtured that love and sharpened my skills. Sister Charlene Klister and Dr. Margaret McKenna Houck in high school. Professors Kent Linville, Hoyt Oliver, Rudi Makkreel, and Tom Flynn. Each in their own way encouraged and pushed me to say what I had to say with my pen (and eventually my laptop).

And then one day, Dr. Hutson Carspecken corrected my cleft palate. I could say with my lips what I had learned to say with the written word. And people could understand me.

Life is not fair. And fair is not good enough for God.

God wants for us more than a life anesthetized by comfort and decorated with material possessions, more than a life measured by our fleeting achievements, our moral rectitude, and our presumed spiritual superiority.

God wants for us a life transformed by the divine presence in its very midst. A life that is overflowing with God's love. And that is just what God is doing through Christ.

Reflection Questions

- Imagine that you are Mary or Martha. You have sent for Jesus to heal your brother Lazarus, but he doesn't come. Lazarus dies. What are you feeling and thinking about Jesus?
- Tell a story about a difficult time in your life when you struggled to see God at work or couldn't see God at all. Be as specific as you can. What were you feeling and thinking about God?
- If you still cannot see how God responded to that situation, how is that shaping your relationship with God now? What do you want to say to God about that?
- If, on looking back, you can see how God was at work, what did that teach you about your true self? About God?