

A woman went to the emergency room, where she was seen by a new, young doctor. After about 3 minutes in the examination room, the doctor told her she was pregnant. She burst out of the room and ran down the corridor screaming. An older doctor stopped her and asked what the problem was; after listening to her story, he calmed her down and sat her in another room. Then the doctor marched down the hallway to the first doctor's room. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded. "This woman is 63 years old, she has 2 grown children and several grandchildren, and you told her she was pregnant?!!" The new doctor continued to write on his clipboard and without looking up said: "Does she still have the hiccups?"

Today's gospel has enough deeply significant detail in it for a whole book. I'll spare you multiple chapters and just look at 3: Jesus delaying His visit, the reactions of Mary and Martha when Jesus comes, and the conversation between Jesus and Martha just before He raises Lazarus. As is typical in John's gospel, all of these details are deeply meaningful.

First, why does Jesus delay? When Jesus hears that Lazarus is seriously ill, He deliberately stays away for a few days. It seems cold and indifferent. By the time He DOES arrive, and finds Lazarus dead, both Mary and Martha say rather accusingly, "Lord, if you had been here, if you had come earlier, if you had come in time, Lazarus would not have died." They knew about Jesus's miracles of healing; He was famous for them already. And they knew how much He loved His friend Lazarus.

We too say to God: "Why are you not answering my prayer? Why are you doing nothing? You have the power, and you have the love. Why are you apparently staying away? Why do you seem to be indifferent to me and my needs that I am praying for?" That is the perfectly natural thing to think and to feel and to pray. It seems to show that God loves us less than He could, that He is not using His power or His love to get us out of our problem, whether our problem is physical, mental or spiritual, a loss of faith, whether in ourselves or in someone we love. Why doesn't God seem to answer our prayers?

And the answer is that God IS answering our prayers. God answers all prayers. But His timing is better than ours. We want instant answers, and they are not always what is best for us. In His wisdom God knows this, knows that in the end it will work out better for us and for those we pray for if He uses His power in HIS time, not ours. There is no limit to His power. He can heal the sick, He can raise the dead, and He can convert the unbeliever. And there is no limit to His love: He wants what is really best for every single one of us, whether we deserve it or not. But He knows what we do not know. He works all things out for good in the end, but we do not see the end; we do not see the future. He does. If we trust His love, His power, AND HIS WISDOM – all of which are perfect and unlimited and infinite – He will do something better than we ask for, not something worse.

In the case of Lazarus, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is even better than Jesus healing him before he dies. Death is apparently the loss of everything, and Jesus lets us all sink into death, this total loss, before He raises us again in the next life. What He does for the rest of us in the next life, He does for Lazarus in this life. He shows us His wisdom, His love, and His power more effectively than we could imagine. Let's look at how He showed all 3 of these attributes in this story: His love and wisdom and power.

He showed His love for Lazarus by the shortest verse in the Bible: "And Jesus wept." What does God feel about our sufferings and death? Jesus shows us. His love. His love is totally human as well as divine. God is not indifferent to our pains. He feels every one of them. Jesus shows us God's tears.

He showed His wisdom by waiting, so that an even greater miracle could happen than the healing miracle Mary and Martha expected and wanted.

He showed His power by conquering not just sickness but death itself, simply by His word. He commanded, “Lazarus, come out!” and Lazarus came out. Even death has to obey His power. His power is infinite. Nothing can withstand it.

Our second point deals with Mary’s and Martha’s reactions to Jesus when He comes. We know these 2 sisters from an earlier story, when Jesus visited their house and Mary just sat at His feet and listened to Him while Martha was worried about all the dinner details and said to Jesus, “Tell her to help me” – a very reasonable thing to say – and Jesus replied surprisingly (Jesus is always surprising us), “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her” (Lk 10:40-42). What did that mean? That good works in the kitchen are not needed too? No, but that Jesus, not anything else, is “the one thing needed.” If we have Jesus, we have everything, no matter what else we don’t have; and if we don’t have Jesus, we have nothing, no matter how much else we have. If that’s not true, then He’s not God, and we are all wasting our time being here. Then Jesus is just a finite, limited creature, one among millions, and He is not enough. BUT, if He is the one true God, then He is the sole source of every good, secular as well as sacred, in the kitchen as well as in the church. As one saint put it, we must do the works of Martha but in the spirit of Mary.

Now we see these same 2 sisters acting out their parts again. Mary quietly stays in the house while Martha busily runs to meet Jesus down the road – which is good, and shows faith in Jesus; but Mary has the greater faith. She waits until Jesus calls her, and then she immediately comes: at His desire rather than hers. On the previous visit of Jesus to their house, if Jesus had told Mary to leave Him and go to the kitchen to help Martha, she would gladly have done it. It’s not a question of prayer versus good works; it’s a question of “thy will be done” versus “my will be done.” That’s the difference between the greater faith and the lesser faith. Like Martha’s busy works, our desires and hopes and loves are many, but Mary’s is only one: Jesus Himself. That’s why Jesus has to redirect Martha’s faith and hope from the future resurrection of the many to the present one, the one who IS “the resurrection and the life.” Lazarus was only a large PART of her life, and of her love, and of her hope; Jesus was to be ALL of it.

Although Mary’s faith is greater, yet even that lesser faith of Martha’s is real faith. But Jesus increases it, and that’s our 3rd point, the point of the dialogue between Jesus and Martha before He raises Lazarus. In this conversation with Martha, Jesus performs an even greater miracle than the one He does a few minutes later in raising Lazarus from the dead. He raises Martha’s faith. That’s a greater miracle than raising a dead body, because a dead body has no power to resist Him but a live soul does. A dead body has no mind or will to think wrong thoughts or to refuse to believe; but a living human soul does. When God created the universe out of nothing, that was a great deed, but when He makes a saint out of a sinner, or makes a greater saint out of a lesser one, which is what He did to Martha here, that is an even greater deed, because nothingness had no power to resist His word when He commanded it to become something, as Lazarus’ dead body had no power to disobey His command to rise. But a human soul has free will and it can hold back; it can be double minded; it can be mistrusting as well as trusting.

Look how Jesus raises her faith. First, He ratifies her present faith by assuring her that Lazarus will rise again. And Martha says, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.” And then Jesus calls her to a higher faith. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in ME, even if they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believe in me will never die. Do you believe THIS?” Do you believe not just this general theological truth, this abstract, impersonal concept, but do you believe in ME? And she answers, “Yes,

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Lord.” I believe in you. And only then does He raise Lazarus. Before He spectacularly and visibly raised Lazarus, He gently and invisibly raised her faith. His words called out to her sleeping faith: “Awake! Come forth out of the tomb, out of the shadows, into the light. I am the light.” And Martha’s faith responded and rose into the light.

Jesus was that light and is that light. Jesus is God. God is life, and the source of all life. God is light, and the source of all light. God is love, and the source of all love.

Do we believe that? That’s the question we are asked today, right now, at this very moment, as we hear these words that He spoke to Martha 2000 years ago. He is speaking them to us now. (all of this adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 229-232)

A story to conclude. The number “15231” is very special to the members of the New York City police department. It’s the badge number of Detective Steven McDonald, the kind of police officer that brings pride to the force and to the city they serve.

On the afternoon of July 12, 1986, Officer McDonald and his partner Peter King were checking out a string of bicycle thefts in Central Park. They approached 3 teenagers who bolted. Chasing them down, McDonald began questioning them when one of the boys – 15 years old – pulled out a gun and fired. As the police officer fell, the boy fired 2 more times.

Cradling his partner in his arms, King radioed for help. EMTs responded immediately and got him to Harlem’s Metropolitan Hospital. The doctors, nurses and technicians miraculously saved his life. But the second bullet had hit McDonald’s spine; He was paralyzed from the neck down. During his long convalescence, his wife Patti Ann, gave birth to their son Conor. McDonald remembers: “To me, Conor’s birth was like a message from God that I should live, and live differently. And it was clear to me that I had to respond to that message. I prayed that I would be changed, that the person I was would be replaced by something new.

“That prayer was answered with a desire to forgive the young man who shot me. I wanted to free myself of all the negative, destructive emotions that his act of violence had unleashed in me: anger, bitterness, hatred, and other feelings. I needed to free myself of those emotions so that I could love my wife and our child and those around us.”

McDonald reached out to the young man who shot him, Shavod Jones. It took some time, but the officer and the 15-year-old connected. McDonald forgave him. He writes: “I forgave Shavod because I believe the only thing worse than receiving a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended my injury to my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It’s bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury.” That’s an incredible insight – non-forgiveness causes spiritual injury in the one who refuses to forgive.

Over time, the 2 actually became friends and carried on a correspondence. Again, he writes: “I’m sometimes angry at the boy who shot me, but more often I feel sorry for him. I only hope that he can turn his life into helping and not hurting people. I forgive him and hope that he can find peace and purpose in life.”

But forgiving Shavod was only the beginning for McDonald. He was determined not to be defined by his disability and all that had been taken from him. He spoke widely at schools and churches, proclaiming the power of forgiveness, but also trying to break the cycle of violence that makes victims of so many, including

the boy who shot him – a young man he says “whom society had failed way before he met me in Central Park.”

McDonald also worked with police officers who were wounded in the line of duty and served as a resource for their families.

McDonald died of a heart attack on January 10, 2017. He was 59. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who presided at his funeral Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, called McDonald “an icon of mercy and forgiveness, a prophet of the dignity of all human life.”

A year later, the NYPD retired Steven McDonald’s shield.

No police officer in the city of New York will ever again wear shield number 15231. For the NYPD, it’s much more than a number. (PLOUGH, Feb 26, 2013; THE NEW YORK TIMES, March 2, 1987 and January 10, 2017)

Throughout our lives, we experience many ‘deaths;’ we find ourselves bound by the burial cloths of fear and hopelessness and despair – but the Jesus of the Gospels challenges us to realize the possibilities for resurrection, for bringing forth something new and good in all of these ‘deaths.’ We all possess the insight, grace and courage to be freed from our ‘tombs’ to something life-giving and positive, once we grieve what was lost and adapt to what has changed. Steven McDonald faced a number of ‘deaths’: the loss of his ability to move his body, the end of a job he loved. But in acting with mercy instead of anger, he found the wisdom and grace to ‘rise’ from those ashes to embrace a new life, becoming a vehicle of forgiveness, mercy and healing for others. The faith that Martha possesses in today’s Gospel and the grace Steven McDonald lived after that horrible day in 1986 are ours as well if we are willing to move beyond our fears and doubts and embrace the promise of Christ’s resurrection. Amen. (Story from CONNECTIONS, 26 March 2023)