

LOOSING LAZZARUS

LESSON 1

JESUS WENT,
SO I MUST GO!

SEVEN WAYS TO DECONSTRUCT PERSONAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM FROM JOHN 11

LOOSING LAZARUS

LESSON 1:
JESUS WENT, SO I
MUST GO!

So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days.
John 11:17

When our church relocated from the city of Franklin into Nashville in 2012, I hardly knew anyone in our new suburban vicinity. Our first several months were spent cleaning and renovating the buildings and trimming trees. One day, a white man showed up to the door of the church with two cups of Starbucks coffee in his hands. As he handed me the coffee, he stepped into the foyer and introduced himself as Scott. Scott told me he was a pastor and his church was located a few miles from ours. He said he wanted to come by and welcome us to the neighborhood.

Scott didn't stay long, but he definitely made his presence felt. We talked about a number of things and then exchanged numbers. I knew I had just gained a friend. I'm so grateful that Scott took a risk to come into my world that day because we have been friends ever since. Our churches have followed our lead and have joined us on several initiatives and ministry opportunities.

Scott and I have been there for one another through tough times, and I know I can call him at any time about anything. Scott and I often laugh about that day when he came into our church carrying two cups of coffee because I had to tell him I was not a coffee drinker! Therefore, the next time Scott came he brought me a smoothie! As a white man, Scott took a risk coming to see a black man he didn't know. He knew nothing about my temperament or my doctrinal beliefs. He simply knew he wanted to be my friend.

This is what love does. Love goes into other people's worlds and serves them, and no one does this better than Jesus Christ. Jesus left His Father's bosom in glory and came to earth through the womb of the virgin Mary. He came on a mission to save us from our sins and bring us back to God. Jesus emptied Himself of the full expression of His deity in order to put on the vulnerable robes of humanity. He incarnated into the world so that He could come and live in our hearts by faith.

Love moves. Love acts. Love takes a risk; it just doesn't talk. It inconveniences itself. Love reaches out and it reaches over. During His earthly ministry, Jesus constantly went to hurting people. He often initiated contact as well as conversation with them because that's what love does. In John 11, Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, the one He loved (*John 11:5*). He may have arrived late according to Mary and Martha's timetable, but according to God's divine schedule Jesus arrived right on time.

When it comes to matters of race in today's world, it's better to be late to the party than to never show up at all. By going to Bethany to be with the grieving family, Jesus offered the ministry of presence and proximity. As Jehovah Shamma (i.e., The Lord who is near), Jesus didn't stay inside of a synagogue expecting the people to come to Him. Instead, Jesus took His love and His gospel to the streets. He was willing to risk sacrificial uncleanness by being at the tomb of Lazarus, and even though the environment was hostile and dangerous for Him to go (*John 11:8*), Jesus went anyway.

It's usually a risk to go and love someone, but it's always worth it when we do. It was Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, who said, "In order to be guardians of justice, we must change the narrative, remain hopeful, do uncomfortable things, and become proximate." When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, our Lord exalted the socially disadvantaged Samaritan because he chose to be present in the wounded man's hour of need. Not knowing if the robbers who injured the man were still around, the Samaritan chose to take a risk and help the man because that's what loving your neighbor looks like.

It's good to be reminded that whenever we incarnate into other people's worlds, we don't have to be the savior. Jesus already has that area taken care of! We must remember that although we serve the Christ, we are not the Christ (*John 1:20*)! That knowledge should take the pressure off. This is especially important for our white brothers and sisters to be reminded of so as to avoid having a "savior's mentality." You don't have to fix it (because you can't) and you don't have to have all of the answers (because you don't).

You don't always need to write a check (because everything can't be resolved with money), and you don't need to feel ashamed for not coming earlier (because you're here now). Whether you walk into your black friend's cubicle, call her on the phone, or knock on his door, your love will be felt and appreciated. You don't need to speak a lot of words unless you're praying or asking a simple question like, "How are you holding up after the murder of _____." This is when you listen, learn, lean in, and lament.

Jesus went and incarnated into the personal spaces of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. To be like Christ, we must go when our neighbors are mourning from the ripple effects of racism. Going looks different for each of us. The only thing that matters is that we go. Some will join their black friends in protest marches. Some will actually relocate into an African American neighborhood.

Others will incarnate into a church led by a black male—and stay there! Some may even show up at their neighbor’s house and take the posture of burden bearer, listener, and intercessor. Some will write letters, meet with lawmakers, and vote in ways that affect policy. When you do any of these things and more, you will more than likely end up gaining more than you could ever give because Jesus said we find our lives when we lose them for His sake.

But you will never know if you never go.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01.** Jesus went where people were mourning and hurting. When we consider the mourning that is taking place in many portions of the black community after the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others, why is it sometimes intimidating for white people to go and bear the burdens of their black friends and neighbors?
- 02.** When Jesus went to Bethany, He listened to Martha and Mary share their grief, even when it seemed like they blamed Him for it (*see John 11:21, 32*). What can you apply from this as you run the risk of being blamed directly or indirectly as a white person while incarnating among people of color?
- 03.** Rather than walking into other people's pain-filled worlds, it's easier for us to walk away. However, this is not what Jesus modeled for us or expects of His disciples. In his landmark book, *White Awake*, Daniel Hill, a white pastor in an urban context, described white privilege as "the ability to walk away." What are your thoughts about this statement? Do you agree or disagree?
- 04.** If you are a white believer in Christ, what would be some of the benefits of incarnating into a church led by a black pastor and joining it? What do you think some of the challenges might be? Why don't we see more white people joining churches led by black pastors?
- 05.** What are some practical and personal ways that you can go into the world of black people and other minorities to stand with them in the midst of racial turmoil?

