I have often joked, especially when the schedule has tightened up and I have more requests on my time than I can deliver, that I’ve figured out how to be in two places at once, and now I’m working on how to make it three. Truth be told however, even Jesus couldn’t be in two places at once, and this familiar story from John’s gospel proves that out.

Another thing it shows is that while we are physically in one place, there are often times when our minds and hearts – not to mention our hearts – are in another. Over the years, when our children were still at home, there were times when I couldn’t attend some of their activities – their ballgames and such – due to my work. It might have been a committee meeting, or some other function, and while I did my best to concentrate on the matters at hand, to be present to where I was at any given time, my thoughts often went to what they might be doing at that moment. It is human nature, I suppose. Our minds can be in two places at once, even if our bodies are not.

I can’t help but believe the same was true for Jesus. Here is what I mean...

He had been in Jerusalem, and things had started heating up. He had healed the man born blind, on the sabbath no less – that always got the Pharisees’ blood boiling – and not unlike what we are seeing in the political state of our nation today, his teachings have divided the people, especially the religious authorities. Some thought he was demon-possessed (which was their way of dismissing just about any behavior that didn’t match their litmus tests), while others disagreed with that judgment.
They were pressing him to identify himself as the Messiah – or not – and when he didn’t play their games some of them make a rather weak attempt to stone him for what they perceived was his blasphemy. When that didn’t work out for them, they tried to have him arrested, and since his time had not yet come, he slipped away and found retreat on the other side of the Jordan where John had been baptizing earlier.

Evidently he was still there when he received word about Lazarus. My calculations tell me Jesus was about forty miles away when he heard that his friend was gravely ill. The natural instinct would be for him to hustle back to Bethany as soon as possible and see what he could do for the brother of Mary and Martha. After all, there is great affection between Jesus and the family of Lazarus. “Lord,” the message said, “he whom you love is ill.”

I have a collection of sermon pamphlets, prepared by preachers I have come to trust over the years. So I decided to see what they might have said about this story from John’s gospel. In one of them, the preacher tells of the time he was pastoring in San Antonio, Texas. He and his wife were spending the Thanksgiving holiday with her family in west Texas when he received word that a faithful family in their congregation had been involved that morning in a serious car accident.

He quickly made arrangements and flew back home to be with the family. Sometimes, pastors do that sort of thing, you know... sacrifice time with their own families to minister to others in their flock. It’s a part of the calling, pure and simple. Good and faithful pastors don’t whine about it, they just do it.

But that doesn’t seem to be Jesus’ way of doing things, does it? To drop what he is doing and leave immediately? Even for his good friend Lazarus. At least, that’s not what he does here.

Forty miles. He is forty miles away, not far in our world today – just hop in the car and go – but in those days it was a fairly healthy journey, as difficult as getting from west Texas to San Antonio. It called for changing his current agenda, making provisions, and establishing new plans. It would probably require at least a couple of days of hard walking, even if he left immediately. Yet, the sisters have sent a
message to Jesus that they needed him. You’d think he would want to leave for Bethany immediately.

Actually, that’s not what the message said. They simply informed Jesus that Lazarus was ill. I think there’s something significant to that. Allow me to share my theory with you.

The fact that they could send a messenger to Jesus with the simple note that Lazarus was ill says to me – and I hope I’m not reading too much into this... I’ll leave that up to you to decide – that they are people of means. First of all, either they hired someone to deliver the message or they had a servant who could do so. And, the simple message, “Lord, he whom you love is ill,” implies that they anticipate that Jesus will do their bidding... immediately. They don’t ask him to come, according to the message, they simply think he will do so.

In addition to their close relationship, it may be, because of their wealth and/or status in the community, that they expect anybody to do their bidding, which says again that they could be wealthy, and we all know that wealth tends to breed power, and power leads to expectations.

And while that may not seem to be important to this story, I think it is. When Jesus, after receiving the message, decides to delay in going to Lazarus, it could – it could – imply that despite his close relationship to this family, he’s not going to take orders from anyone except his heavenly Father... that wealth and means and power mean nothing to him. But I think that could be a bit of an overreach. Instead, I think it simply means that he hears his heavenly Father whispering in his ear, “I have a higher purpose in this. Stay where you are awhile and it will be revealed.”

“This illness does not lead to death,” Jesus says to his disciples.

Let’s pause for a moment. If you were here last week, you heard Jesus say to his disciples that the man born blind – the one he healed in Jerusalem by spitting on his hands and mixing it with dirt, making a poultice and rubbing it on the man’s eyes and having him wash them in the pool at Siloam – was blind “so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (9:3). You also heard me admit that I’m not sure
what Jesus means by that, except that Jesus sees in ways we cannot see and therefore does things for reasons we don’t understand.

He says essentially the same thing here. “... it is for God’s glory,” he tells his disciples, “so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” I’ve got to tell you... I haven’t gotten any smarter in one week. I confess I know as little about what Jesus means here as I did about what he said in regard to the blind man.

All I do know is what we are told in the fourth gospel, that Jesus stayed on the other side of the Jordan two more days. In those two days he could have returned to Bethany and perhaps kept his friend from having to enter that grave. The timing would have been close, but he could have done it. Think about it... two days he lingered, plus the two days it probably took him finally – finally! – to get to Bethany and his friends. When he arrives he is told that Lazarus has been dead four days. And we all know that two plus two has always, and always shall, equaled four.

Jesus could have possibly gotten there in time. Yet, he chose to stay where he was.

My guess is that during those two days that Jesus lingered on the other side of the Jordan, all he thought about was Lazarus. But not just Lazarus, perhaps. He also considered the consequences of his return, his raising Lazarus from the grave, and what that meant in regard to his own death. No doubt he wanted to be there for his friends, but something held him back. I don’t think it was fear of his crucifixion. I do think the something that held him back was the quiet voice of his Father in his ear.

That, and the fact that even he could not be in two places at once.

Like the story we considered last week about the man born blind, this is a long and involved narrative. And as we did last Sunday, we did not read it this morning in its entirety. In fact, you may have noticed that we cut off Martha in mid-sentence. Did you pick up on that?

That was intentional, by the way. “Lord,” she says to Jesus the very moment he arrives, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” She goes on to
say, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” We didn’t include that last part of her statement in our earlier reading because we wanted you to note the tension between Jesus and Martha. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

That tension was real.

This is not my idea, my concept. It is borrowed from someone else, but I share it with you because I think it is so true... Our relationships are like bank accounts. A good and healthy relationship develops when the people involved continue over time to make positive and affirming deposits. A kind word, a good and supportive deed, time spent with one another in table fellowship, traveling together, maybe even a well-timed personal handwritten note, or being there in times of crises when the presence of a friend is so desperately needed... these are the kinds of deposits we make with each other that fortify and strengthen our relationships, not just for the time being but for the long haul.

But every once in awhile, in any relationship, a withdrawal is made. Anger erupts, suspicion ensues, perhaps accompanied by harsh words. The relationship may be damaged, but if enough deposits have been made over time the friendship can be sustained and repaired because there’s enough emotional strength to undergird and support it.

Jesus has made a withdrawal in his relationship with Mary and Martha, and Martha is quick to call him out on it. And, we know that Mary will do the same in just a few moments (they’ve been conspiring together, haven’t they?). Yet, Jesus has made enough emotional deposits with them that Martha was able to say confidently, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Still, note the tension between the two. Martha upbraids him for not having come sooner. Somehow, she seems to know where Jesus has been, when he might have received her message about her brother, and is aware that Jesus could have arrived in time had he wanted to do so.
What happened? Why did he not come when he was summoned? Why this huge — huge — withdrawal from their relationship? Like any mortal, Jesus can’t be in two places at once, but that doesn’t seem to be the reason why he hasn’t come in a timely fashion. There has to be another reason.

I think it may be this: While Jesus cannot be in two places at once, he can do the will of the Father where he is. And where he chooses to be, at any given time, is determined by his Father’s will and not just his own.

Those two days he lingered didn’t just cause him to think about his friend Lazarus. He no doubt also knew that bringing Lazarus back from the grave would mean he would enter his own, that the death of Lazarus would insure his own death on a cross. “... it is for God’s glory,” he tells his disciples, “so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” In John’s gospel, the words “glory and glorified are code words for the crucifixion.”

That would give anyone pause, don’t you think? Even Jesus.

The point is, of course, that he did eventually come to his friends, and that when Jesus comes to those in need – to you and me or anyone else – even when we question his timing, it is never too late. He may not have been able to have been in two places at once, but Jesus always was where he needed to be because he never wavered from listening to his Father’s voice.

Jesus is where he needs to be even now. The question is, is he where he needs to be for you? Only you can answer that question, but as we continue our journey with him to the cross, it is an answer you need to seek. I encourage you to do just that as we follow Jesus to the cross.

*Lord, we come to you now in all humility, trusting not only in your grace, but in the timing of it. We believe you will be there for us as we continue to make our journey to the cross. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

**Notes**
