

## The Measure of a Church

**“Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. . . . Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, ‘Behold how He loved him.’”**

— John 11:5, 35-36

I was recently reading the account of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. From reading a variety of other sources, I found the burial and funeral ceremonies of the time quite interesting. It is very likely they put Lazarus in some kind of cave on a stone shelf, which was typically done in catacombs. The ‘funeral’ procession would then go back to a house and mourners would stay for seven days, which would complete the initial part of the funeral. For seven days people would be sitting in the house. They wouldn’t eat until the body was taken to be buried. They didn’t want any exhibition of levity or lightheartedness as it was to be observed as a very serious time. There was to be no expression of joy. They didn’t want any kind of normalcy until the body had been buried, at which point, they would serve a meal. A meal of bread, hard-boiled eggs and lentils would be served; somewhat of a traditional meal to feed the people who were going to stay.

They would continue to care for the family of the deceased, and others would bring food as the mourners stayed for those seven days. They didn’t just sit quietly like Job’s friends and say nothing. They mourned and wailed loudly. The women led this, thus it was a kind of screaming, howling situation. They saw this as comfort because of the sympathy behind it. It was an expected traditional ceremony, and this wailing went on for seven days.

So when Jesus comes and Lazarus has been dead four days, this ceremony is still in full bloom. Sympathy was everybody’s duty. The wailing ended, which included professional wailers that were hired to act as leaders of the others. They embraced the family for seven days, and then after those seven days of really intense wailing, they would continue mourning for another thirty days. There would be further public expressions of mourning for another thirty days as additional friends and other people came around. During this time there would be reminiscences, eulogies and remembrances. There would be the sharing of stories and whatever was necessary to comfort. It really was a beautiful custom.

I think so often of how we do funerals. First of all, we don’t know much about death because the body disappears and that’s the last thing we know. Then we go to a funeral and it lasts an hour or two, then we’re gone, and there might be some comfort from that event, but it’s mostly an occasion rather than an interaction. It’s all over, and we go on with life. It was a very different scenario than what we experience today.

Somehow my mind segued and I began thinking about the measure of a church, and how the character of a church is not made known by how well it entertains young people. The character of a church is made known by how well it embraces older people. The character of a church is not how well it can capture the lighthearted who are alive and young; it’s how well it can capture and hold the heartbroken, the grieving. How does it deal with the suffering? How does it deal with old age? How does it deal with cancer? How does it deal with loving people at the worst times of life? That’s the measure of a church.

Anybody can draw a crowd. Anybody can put on an event. Anybody can do a rock concert and attract young people who are just looking for the next gig. The measure of a church is determined by how it sustains relationships with people all the way to the grave, and fully embraces them, and loves them right unto death. That’s the measure of a church. There may be churches that do it with more love and affection than others. The measure of a church is not known by just sitting in a pew on a Sunday and listening to what is being said from the pulpit.

The measure of a church is seen in the hardest times of life, the most grievous times of life, the agonies of life, long drawn-out slow deaths or terrible, accidental deaths, and how a church embraces people at the low points, the hard points in life. That’s the measure of a church.