

New World Syndrome *John 11:1-45* | 3/17/2002

Micronesians dropping dead in their 50s are not dying for reasons commonly associated with the developing world. There is no famine here and little evidence of the diseases that cut life short in places such as Africa. The big killer is what some epidemiologists are now calling "New World Syndrome" -- a constellation of maladies brought on not by viruses or microbes or parasites, but by the assault of rapid Westernization on traditional cultures. The people of Micronesia, in the western Pacific Ocean, are getting fat from eating Spam and potato chips and turkey tails. They are turning into what might be called "MACRO-nesians," and the change is killing them.

It's not the problems of poverty that are killing them, but instead the scourge of affluence. They are just now beginning to face the diseases that knock us off here in the United States: malaria, dysentery and diarrhea have been replaced by diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure. They're facing these problems because they have discovered our fatty, sweet and salty foods: Spam and corned beef and Vienna sausages, cake and muffin mixes, soda and beer and candy bars and potato chips.

Go into a Micronesian grocery store, and you can find plenty of unhealthy imported food, but you can't buy fresh bananas, papayas, breadfruit, coconut or mangoes. Apart from a fish shack or two, and a few stands hawking bags of the island's famous green tangerines, there is nowhere to buy local produce. Most islanders once grew fruits and vegetables on family plots and pulled tuna and other fish from the sea. But the majority of modern residents don't have time or energy to farm or fish -- they are too busy with their office jobs. Welcome to the New World -- the promised land of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

Not that all our problems in the United States are purely physical. Our spiritual diet is bad for us as well, and it's hurting us at younger ages all the time. We're victims of our own brand of New World Syndrome, getting sick from all the junk food that we ingest in our rapid-fire, multitasking, point-and-click, radically individualistic, consumer-oriented culture.

Today, a shrinking number of people are eating the fruits of traditional religious culture. At the same time, a hunger for personal spirituality -- cut off from religious institutions -- has been soaring. Many people are feeling spiritually dead, and like Lazarus in the tomb, they're searching for life in online chat rooms, in exotic religions and in the self-help sections of shopping mall bookstores.

What's missing in all this is what Jesus proposes for us. In John 11:25, Jesus prescribes what might be called an "R and L antidote" to spiritual death: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." This is not too salty, sweet or fatty, and it provides us the spiritual nourishment we need for abundant life, now and forever. To grasp the full significance of this suggestion, we need to take a careful look at the story of the raising of Lazarus and gain a deeper understanding of just how Jesus confronts -- and then conquers -- the powers of sickness and death.

You might be in for a surprise. For starters, it is clear that Jesus is not untouched or unmoved by physical and spiritual destruction. He takes fatal illness seriously and personally. Going to the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus, Jesus encounters the sisters Martha and Mary, and when Jesus sees Mary weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and is deeply moved. He begins to weep himself, prompting some onlookers to say, "See how he loved him!" (v. 36).

What a powerful image this is: God's own Son, the King of Kings and Lord of lords, so overcome by grief over the loss of his friend, and by anger over the destructive power of death, that he breaks down in tears. Death is not a minor annoyance for Jesus. It is something that affects him so profoundly that he is overwhelmed by emotion and he cries. And just as he weeps over Lazarus, he weeps over physical deaths in Micronesia and spiritual deaths in our country.

But then, suddenly, another group of onlookers in the story speaks up and makes a less sympathetic observation: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man [Lazarus] from dying?"

Ouch. That sounds rather heartless and cutting, doesn't it? But don't dismiss it too quickly. It's a question that a great many people ask every day.

Think about it. Why doesn't the universe-creating God create miraculous cures for little children with cancer? Why doesn't the death-conquering Christ beat the heart disease of elderly church members? Why doesn't the apostle-inspiring Spirit of God give special powers to rescue workers at accident sites?

Martha admits that she expects a straightforward healing miracle when she says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 21). She is confident that Jesus holds power over illness, and she believes that he would have chosen to use his power to help her brother Lazarus.

But then Jesus says something very interesting, and very unexpected. Instead of explaining to Martha that he is going to raise Lazarus in just a few minutes, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (v. 25) This is not a straightforward healing. It's the R & L antidote. Rather than promising Martha a miracle, he invites her to trust him to work for new life. There's a big difference between these two. Instead of saying, "I'm going to step in and make everything okay," Jesus says, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." He promises that the dead will rise, but he doesn't predict just how.

So what does Martha do in response to this invitation? She says "yes." She believes. She proclaims, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (v. 27).

The very same invitation is extended to us today. Jesus says to us, in the vortex of our physical and spiritual illnesses: "I am the resurrection and the life Do you believe this?" Do you believe that I am working for radical new life? Do you believe that I am the resurrection, the one who conquers death? Do you believe that I am leading you, right now, in so many unexpected ways, from dying to rising?

Sarah Hinlicky was studying for her Master of Divinity degree at Princeton Theological Seminary. She spent time visiting with her dying grandfather, a time of sadness and grief that was complicated by the fact that her grandfather really didn't approve of women in the ministry. On her last visit, she offered to pray with him, and then began to cry. "He opened his arms," she reports, and "I threw myself down on his chest, wondering if I might accidentally crack one of his brittle ribs, and he wrapped those dying arms around me. I gripped them.

There was something miraculous about them. They were so unlovable, objectively speaking, so ugly and powerless. They looked like death. They pointed to death. They even called out for death. But to me, they were the embodiment of love, love right in the middle of death. I wanted to touch and hold them, to examine their discolored spots, to keep them near because they were telling me that death can't annihilate our love.

"His yellow hands stroked my hair, and I started to pray, not very well, not very eloquently, not very coherently. He prayed, too, calmly, quietly, humorously even. He said, 'Let Sarah be a good conservative theologian for her church,' because to my grandpa, 'conservative' is the logical equivalent of confessional and orthodox.' I had to giggle through my tears.

But then, a confession and an admission. He prayed, 'Lord, I didn't know what to think of this business of letting women be ordained pastors. But I see that you have called my granddaughter into it, so I think it must be a good thing after all.' And there it was, at the very end: The man who had baptized me was now blessing me to carry on his work in the world." When we face physical or spiritual death, there is only one antidote: resurrection and life. It comes to us through believing in Jesus and through trusting him to be at work for unexpected new life in every time, place and situation.

Although once dead, we are now alive. Call it New Life Syndrome.

Pastor Keith