

John 11

(Lectionary Year A, Lent 5)

By Beth Barnett

Using John 11 as a conversation starter to encourage conversation about 'facing the "If Only" in our lives.

You will need:

- 1 (or more) Presenter
- copies of this page or the conversation questions, distributed amongst the gathering

Time required:

10 – 15 minutes (or longer, depending on how much space you will give to the small group conversation section)

Connect:

Facilitating this conversation will require you to present a personal story of a situation that provoked some 'if only' thinking in your life. This is my example.

Several years ago we got wiped out in the Global Financial Crisis. We lost our house. I put my post-grad studies on hold to go back to full time work, taking two jobs, there was not a lot of joy in our household.

We had to face some tough decisions about where to live, where the kids would go to school, how much change was necessary. There was a lot to think about in terms of getting the future sorted.

But there was also in the midst of those days, a lot of 'if only' thinking. You know the kind I mean?

The kind of thoughts that want you to press the rewind button, wishing that you had taken a different option.

The 'if only' thoughts – if only I had been more careful, if only we had acted sooner, if only I had asked for help, if only I had spoken what was on my mind, if only God had shown up when I needed him.

But I can tell you, the “if onlys” are the fast track freeway to depression, to missing the moment with your kids and those who love you now, to seeing the new hope that is about to emerge out of what looks like a stinky cemetery of death and grief. Children are not naturally ‘if only’ thinkers. They live in the present moment and in the “what if?” of the future. They learn the ‘if only’ kind of regret when we model it to them.

Perhaps it is better that we let them model for us the living in the present and endless hopefulness for a future that is still open before us.

We are going to break out into some small groups for a few minutes and have a conversation: the questions on the hand out will help your group to think about our stories, and share with each other. I’d like to encourage you to be generous and gracious with each other, making sure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to do so. Let’s be gentle and kind as people share – these conversations can be hard!

What’s your story?

Do you have memories of times when you were completely ‘in the moment’ with your kids, with no thought for an ‘if only’?

How do you shift from ‘if only’ to ‘what if’ thinking?

Have you had to confront the death of someone close with your children?

Have you had a moment when you’ve said to God (whether you are really sure God’s there or not), “Why didn’t you show up sooner?”

Content: What’s God’s Story?

Martha, in the Bible, says it for all of us.

Her brother Lazarus, who is very close mates with Jesus, is really ill. She can see he’s not going to pull through, and so she sends a message to Jesus. Jesus doesn’t rush down, either to say goodbye to Lazarus or to support him and the family through their sadness, or to intervene and miraculously heal him. When Jesus does show up, four days after Lazarus has died, Martha wants to know what took him so long.

“Where were you when we needed you?” she justifiably asks.

And right there, I think she speaks for all of us.

At one time or another we find ourselves asking, “where was God when...?” even if not for ourselves,

- for the children who live on garbage dumps



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- for those who are victims of abuse
- for those who lack even a safe water supply
- for those who descend into a self- destructive insanity of addiction and compulsion.

Why doesn't Jesus show up and flipping do something?

But strangely, as we enter this process, we discover a couple of things about ourselves.

Firstly, we realise how deeply we care, how strongly we feel not for ourselves but for another person. While it is tempting to try and protect our children from these questions, it is part of discovering our capacity for compassion.

Secondly, though we think we have no faith, that our doubts have overcome us in the face of suffering, here we are expecting something of God! When we are hurting for another, concerned and grieved, God is able to take all of the questions we can serve up.

Meanwhile, God specialises in the 'What if...', not the 'If only...'.



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