

November 1, All Saints Day: John 11:32-44

## **When I read John 11 and heard Jesus thundering, “Unbind him and let him go!” I realized I had not forgiven my father.**

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

It's hard for me to read this weeping scene from John and not think about that Mother's Day a few years ago. The grief of Jesus, Mary, and Martha conjures my own anger, sadness, and loss at my father's death.

My mom and I were not enjoying some decadent chocolate dessert, our custom on any other Mother's Day. And I was far away from my own daughter, feeling the weight of empty arms. I was by my father's hospice bed, the contraption that had made way for home nurses, oxygen tanks, and comforting opiates.

The morning light splattered through the east window, leaving golden speckles across his sheets. I breathed in the smell of the bleach that held the mold at bay, and I noticed a tinge of decay. It was that particular smell that came with sallow skin and a tilt of the head, signaling the end. I had traveled to Florida because I wanted to be with my mom if my father died. It seemed the least I could do on Mother's Day.

I sat, knowing that I had been there before, at that citadel of death. The end had been coming for a decade, but my father always mustered his persistence and kept breathing. I looked down at his resting eyes, wondering if this would be another false alarm.

Seeing his serene face, I was sure I had forgiven him. Dad had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. When I read up on this diagnosis, it was comforting to label his tortured soul and fear of abandonment, as if a handful of syllables could suddenly contain years of confusing emotions. Though most people with BPD are not violent, my father was, so my formative years were tumultuous.

I did my best to make peace with him. “The beauty of death,” my aunt told me, “is that forgiveness is final.” I held his hand, looking forward to that finality.

He woke up. “Where’s your mother?” he asked, his voice graveled with irritation. I wondered if that was it—if I had traveled there for this peevish blurt, my dad wishing I were someone else. This was our moment for strained amends, affirmed love, and whispered promises. I had read about it, seen it in movies: the gift of prolonged dying, when everyone holds their breath in anticipation. But I just got this grumpy question.

“She’s in the living room, watching TV,” I answered, wishing that the morphine drip had made him more pleasant. Then I dutifully fetched my mom, and, unable to figure out how to turn off Fox News, I threw the remote on the couch and walked outside.

I shouldn’t have been annoyed that he didn’t want me. It was probably a bedpan emergency, and he didn’t want the indignity of his daughter handling it. But I had made the trip. I had stood up a congregation where I was to be the guest preacher. My savings were dwindling with each flight. I was hoping he would be a little bit pleased to see me.

I didn’t want our exchange at his bedside to be our last. And I did say many more words. I prayed over my dad, asking God to lead him to green pastures and beside still waters. I reminded him that nothing would separate him from God’s love, and I was comforted by the thought that death might finally close the lonely abyss that haunted his mind. But he died when I left, without speaking to me again, and it didn’t seem fair.

We had the funeral. It was not like Lazarus and his weeping friends. Our eyes were dry, and our loved ones said things like “It’s probably better” while we nodded. The process of dying was long, and he was difficult, and we all knew it. The minister understood our family well enough to paint a realistic picture, not one of a glowing patriarch. We were grateful. We have made our own ways to God on different paths, but none of us has taken a sentimental road. The truth was what we wanted.

Dad was in the grave. It was not a matter of bandages, a cave, and a stone. He had makeup and a shiny box with satin pillows. The freshly torn earth was covered by absurd astroturf. I was not like Mary or Martha; I didn’t feel abandoned by Jesus because my dad had died. I was relieved that his suffering had ended and my mom

could have her life back.

She did get her life back. Life went on for me too. I went to work pastoring, traveling, and pounding out words. Everything seemed normal—except that I lost weight and grew disoriented. Sleeping became something I no longer did on purpose. It overtook and captured me at odd hours; then it left me, abandoned. I lived in a fog of irritability and forgetfulness. Tears flowed at awkward times, unbidden and unwanted. Friends prayed for me, and for the first time, prayer felt like palpable sustenance. I was getting through the days by consuming others' hopes and yearnings for me.

Later I realized I had not forgiven my father. It was when I read this passage and heard Jesus thundering, "Unbind him, and let him go." The words echoed through me. My resentments had bound me to my father, even in his death. I had been afraid that without them, there would be nothing left of our relationship—nothing there to bind us. So I had secretly nursed discontent and unforgiveness. But then I heard that command of Jesus, booming through generations until it called up death itself: Unbind him.

So I unfurled the linen pieces and peeled off the bandages. I gave the wounds air to breathe. I unbound him from my bitterness and acidity. As I let each piece go, I learned that love remains.