

Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year A) – John 11:1-45
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Unbinding

Isn't that a familiar thought! We get so used to Jesus being near; so used to seeing and experiencing God's blessings in our lives that we start to pigeon hole what blessings look like; we want life to go a certain way and when it doesn't, we wonder where God is. People are following Jesus because they have heard and seen him heal friends and relatives. He may have even physically healed them. So why is it that when one of Jesus' closest friends becomes ill and dies, he doesn't rush to his side and save him? People have come to expect Jesus heal the sick; the blind; the lame. And yet, if they were paying really close attention to Jesus' ministry, they would have also heard him teach about the kingdom of God drawing near or being near in their midst; the kingdom of God being as close as he is to them. But sometimes what we see takes precedence over what we hear. Our vision makes us deaf.

Martha has seen Jesus heal and heard Jesus teach. She believes that Jesus is the Messiah. But in this moment of anguish, all she wants is her brother back. She says, “I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” And the desperate bargaining begins. I know you could do this if you really wanted to. I know you could take away my pain right now. I thought you

cared about me. I thought you loved me. I have been a faithful believer, and this is how you repay me? Why are you doing this to me? If you bring my brother back - or sister, or mother, or son - I promise that I will...And the bargaining goes on and on through weariness and exhaustion and our thoughts become washed in waves of chaos and our own misery. God, why are you not answering me? Where are you? Why are you not responding the way I want you to, the way I need you to? "Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let your voice be attentive to the voice of my supplication!"

Before we get too deep into the fray, let's step back into the Judean countryside to be with Jesus and listen for his voice. Jesus says to Martha, "Your brother will rise again....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." At this point, Martha hears Jesus' words as a promise for the future. In response, she professes her faith that Jesus is the Christ - the One whom they all have been waiting for. And she hopes that Jesus will perform another sign by raising her brother. She wants to be shown a sign of Jesus' divine power and human compassion, right now!

Jesus' disciples have been witnessing signs of his divinity since the wedding at Cana. And they may have even experienced a glimpse of his humanity when he angrily turned over the money changers tables in the

Temple. But today, today is when we simultaneously experience Jesus' divinity and humanity. Certainly, we can relate to Jesus's humanity by his coming into the world as a newborn baby.

But one of the most memorable experiences of Jesus' ministry as the Incarnate One is when he weeps as a grown man. Jesus weeps. He weeps at the sight of his dead friend, Lazarus. He weeps alongside Martha and Mary in their sadness and grief. He weeps with us in our heartbreak and agony. His tears are our tears, and our tears are his tears.

While the eventual resurrection of Lazarus is a sign of Jesus' human and divine compassion, it is also a sign of the power of God-in-Christ to resurrect and renew all of life – not just on the last day, but on every day. Today, Jesus resurrects Lazarus, but that is not the last act. Jesus says to the bystanders, “Unbind him, and let him go.” God raises the dead, but it is we who are called to unbind him. Many of us may have in our minds the vivid imagery of literally setting Lazarus free from the bands of burial cloth, but the thought of unbinding may also bring up metaphorical images of loosening the ties that bind us to certain ways of thinking and being.

When I lived in Albuquerque, I served with a priest from my church at a day shelter with homeless people. St. Martin's Hospitality Center offers breakfast and a worship service on Sundays. Similar to how our Sedona Community Suppers program operates, different faith-based organizations

take turns cooking breakfast for visitors, but only on Sundays. On weekdays, St. Martin's offers a full range of social services including warm showers, a safe place to keep visitors' belongings, psychological and vocational counseling, and referrals for free medical and dental care. There is even an art center where homeless people are encouraged to creatively express their thoughts and emotions. More recently, St. Martin's has expanded their services to guide homeless people in transitioning back into a different lifestyle – a way of living that may be so unfamiliar to them that if they were to try it on their own, they would most likely fail and return to the familiar lifestyle of living on the streets or in parks, or under freeway overpasses.

But just as our military veterans need support in transitioning back into civilian life, and victims of human trafficking need compassionate hearts to reestablish trust and hope, homeless people need support in transitioning away from harmful behaviors, in being re-trained to be contributing members of the workforce, and in being re-socialized to manage living in a home and engaging in community. The efforts to transition people from being homeless and unemployed to being housed and working takes an incredible amount of time and effort not just from those who have been living in the shadows of our communities, but by each one of us.

When Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go," he's talking to us. Jesus is inviting us to see people in a new light. To use our creativity and resources to

reimagine who this person without a home or without a job really is. Jesus is inviting us to release the ties that bind us to limited ways of relating to each other – not just our partners or spouses, our co-workers, and our neighbors; but especially the lost, the forgotten, the marginalized, the disenfranchised – any one whom we may deem to be other, less-than, or undeserving. Jesus invites us to unbind ourselves from how we habitually relate to each other; to unwrap the layers and layers of stereotypes and judgmental opinions and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. Jesus invites us to support each other in unbinding ourselves from limited expectations, limited hope, and limited faith – and walking into new life; life abundant with God’s grace. The resurrection Lazarus was something that only Jesus could do. But the rehabilitation and reintegration of those whom we deem as untouchable or undeserving back into society and even into our personal lives begins with us – our own vision, our own hearing, our own imagination, our own actions. Because it is with us and through us and for us that God’s work is done on earth as it is in heaven. May we be raised from lifeless ways of being and unbind the ties that separate us from being the beloved community that God intends for all of us.

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