

“Wake-up Call”

John 11:1-45

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Our journey through Lent these past Sunday mornings, started in Matthew with Jesus' own temptation in the wilderness and then turned to John's hand with increasingly lengthening stories of some well-known if unnamed characters of our faith. From Nicodemus, to the woman at the well, and the almost comical rendition of the man born blind, we now come to the death and the raising of Lazarus; we have seen a religious leader and teacher who by dark of night approached the radical, rabble-rouser who was usurping the title of 'rabbi'; a woman who did not go to the well when all the other women did, and a blind man who, if not from a wealthy family and we have no reason to believe he was, had few if any opportunities for an honorable living. If not outright outcasts, these were people certainly on the fringe.

The shift today is that Jesus takes on that role. Mary, Martha and Lazarus appear to be an upright family of good repute; they have a home, friends, resources; Jesus himself had been to their home and Lazarus is the only named person in the gospels that Jesus loved.

Even so, Jesus does not respond to the appeal the sisters make for his presence when their brother falls ill. In Jesus' culture, to ignore the plight and request of a friend is to bring shame on oneself and possibly one's family. In their social science commentary on the gospel of John, authors Malina and Rohrbaugh wrote, "To have shame is a good thing. Shame is an expression of commitment to civility, a sign one is both civilized and sensitive to the needs of the community. It is an indication that one knows how to control unwieldy and potentially devastating emotions or actions for the sake of maintaining and preserving good social relations" (The Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, p. 194).

These are characteristics we are accustomed to attributing to Jesus but at the outset, he fails to comply. In the first part of the reading, we first have the interchange with the disciples who are confused and then worried; then when Jesus finally goes to Bethany, there is a mantra of challenge if not outright shaming as Jesus hears from nearly everyone he meets, "If you had been here, this would not have happened." In a precursor to taking on the sin of the world in his death, Jesus takes on the shame of the world when Lazarus falls ill.

Again from Malina and Rohrbaugh, "To *be* shamed, however, is not a good thing. Shameful situations are those that contribute to the breakdown of civilized community. One example is an un-neighborly marriage celebration (where the wine runs out). Another is an unsatisfying death (being buried without friends in attendance)" (p. 194).

He has already performed many miracles or 'signs' as John calls them; thus far, he's turned water into wine, cured an official's son, caused a paralytic to rise and walk, walked on water himself, and given sight to the blind man. And in between all the miracles and healings, are a lot of words about the Word (made flesh) as only John can give us including these: "I am the bread," "I am the light," "I am the good shepherd," and now, Me, "I am the resurrection." This is emphatic in the Greek; Jesus is emphatic about his authority and he is emphatic about his identity as each of these echoes the very name of God as given to Moses, "I Am Who I Am."

Martha was converted from anger to trust at a time of deep grief because of the I Am.

And there are prompts for changes social structures as well. He stopped a group of men from stoning a woman by seemingly giving them permission to go ahead and do it – if they were without

sin; he introduced a moral and compassionate response that was not over and above the law but from within. He fed 5000 people in the wilderness one day which is like starting a social service agency. And now, as Lazarus gets sick and dies, Jesus commits an intentional social faux pas and gets called on it over and over again. He taught change both by what he did and what he didn't do.

There is much said about Jesus' tears as proof of his humanness and his great love for Lazarus but he knows what he's come here to do; Lazarus is not permanently lost to him. His tears could certainly be for all Mary and Martha and all they have been through. Mary and Martha have lost more than a beloved brother they have lost what one commentator called their "social security"; without Lazarus, their living situation became more precarious. And then there are the mourners, the friends that have come to weep and lament along with the sisters; it's after they arrive that Jesus was reported to be "greatly disturbed," or some suggest "indignant" is a better word.

Jesus has spoken to both Martha and Mary individually, I imagine Martha tapping her finger to Jesus' chest as she says the words, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Again, it is a mantra almost everyone present repeats in turn, questioning whether Jesus' actions have been those of a healer he was reputed to be, and the teacher and true friend they thought he was. He is disturbed and tearful as death, shame, and what seems like failure abound.

In the Hebrew Scriptures/the Old Testament, the word "death" has three connotations: The first meaning is the cessation of life. The second meaning is a recognition of Death as a power or presence patterned after gods and goddesses of the ancient world; this power can be either positive or negative just as death can be seen as an enemy or a friend. This is not just an ancient psychological understanding; poet David Whyte uses it image, saying that a series of losses or deaths feels like Death moves into the house and won't leave. The third meaning of death in the scriptures is a metaphor for anything that moves us away from God. We know this theologically as 'sin' but we also can know it as fear, anxiety, addiction, repression, PTSD, wounded-ness, or lethargy (to name a few). Death as a presence or as sin is embedded into the culture in which we live by way of racism, sexism, heterosexism, shaming, definitions of failure and success, and the will toward power and control that leads to violence. So as we face our Lenten task of discerning our own dead places, the places of regret, loss, sorrow and, perhaps, failure, we must keep in mind the systemic sin as well.

We all have losses and places where we are less able. What Martha wants to say, what we want to say is: "Jesus if only you had been here" we would not know shame or trauma or death, we would not know blindness, or cancer or what it's like to be lost or feel like we don't belong. But he says, no, no, my friends, these are all part of living and it is through these that you can know the depth of my love for you. And from these experiences, we can be deeply changed.

How many of us would rather jump into the grave and pull the sod over our heads rather than allow a change of heart? How many of us wanted to be in the ground before the sweeping cultural changes caught up with the church and its liturgy, and its life? Artist, writer and poet Jan Richardson reflected on the same question after the death of her husband, she says, "When we suffer an agonizing loss, something of us goes into the grave. As we wrestle with our grief, we will be visited by questions about what new life waits for us. We will find ourselves faced with a choice: will we gather the grave clothes more tightly around ourselves, or will we respond to the voice of Christ, who stands at the threshold and calls us to come out?"

She continued "... Jesus does not go into the tomb to pull Lazarus out. He does not enter his realm to haul him to this side of the living. Lazarus has to choose whether he will loose himself from the hold of the grave: its hold on him, his hold on it. Only when Lazarus takes a deep and deciding breath, rises, returns back across the boundary between the living and the dead: only then does Jesus

say to the crowd, "Unbind him and let him go." Not until Lazarus makes his choice does the unwinding of the shroud begin, and the grave clothes fall away" (from *Circle of Grace*, by Jan Richardson, shared in a blog post).

When he chooses to answer the call – when we choose to answer the call to live into the social benefits of shame, we live into the way it promotes civilization and helps manage heightened emotions. We need to unbind one another.

So, I cataloged my failures one afternoon while walking laps here in the sanctuary; I have, unlike the woman at the well, failed to attract even one husband, though akin to her, is the failing to have children. I have failed in the real estate market, losing my townhouse after I finished my last interim in 2010; I did not find any work for six months nor fulltime work for another year and a half. In contrast to that old commercial that shows people walking around with a seven or eight figure number under their arms, I have failed to build the required fortune, as one investor so delicately put it, 'you can have a very nice retirement – if you die young'; the Board of Pensions representative at Credo was kinder, when I asked what more I could do to prepare, he told me to "make more money." Did he mean I should get a printing press, do you think?

Jesus calls out – to call us out from the sadness for the past – with the offer and encouragement for healing and there with the reminder the past is not our dwelling place. Here in the present, I know I am blessed beyond measure!

Jesus calls out – to call us out from focusing on the future – almost all our anxiety and fear is future-bound; it is counter to the culture in which we live, but if we can focus on today, we will have less of both.

And today, today I believe God is more concerned about our understanding of how deeply embedded racism is in our culture. God is concerned for the LGBT community's freedom and safety, for refugees and for peace.

In light of all of this, the words I was given this week, the question we have to decide is, am I a crucifier or the crucified? We know we do not want to be crucifiers but to choose to be crucified feels counter to life. The alternative is to live from our experiences of loss, grief, failure, fear, hurt, trauma, shame, sin – all of which take us away from God who is Bread, Life, Light, and Truth! It is an extraordinary tension in Christian life. So we are called to unbind one another. The work we have to do is to come to know and trust that the mystery of God whose power brings the dead back to life is present within us. Do you believe this?

"Yes Lord, we believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." Thanks be to God. Amen.