

CROSS PURPOSES:

House of the Dead

John 12:1-8

Text:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

John 12:1

Introduction

Look at Lazarus. Look at Lazarus sitting at supper with Jesus and other guests in Lazarus' own house. Look at Lazarus. Study him. Examine his features. Observe his countenance. Does he have a vacant look? Are his eyes vacuous, or are they penetrating as if they see beyond the confining limits of this world? Does he have a *lean and hungry look*,ⁱ or is his gaze imbued with the satisfaction of knowing what no one else knows, of having seen what no one else has seen, of having been where no one else has been, of having visited that undiscovered country from which no one else has ever returned?

This morning, for a few brief moments, we are in the house of the dead. We are in the house of the dead man Lazarus, and we are in the house of the ceremony of preparing Jesus for his death and burial six days later. The reminder of Lazarus' death that has occurred and the premonition of Jesus' death that is to come hang in the air like an invisible, inevitable shroud of envelopment.

At Cross Purposes with Death

Jesus had been a frequent visitor to this house in Bethany. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha were counted among his closest friends. Martha had prepared many meals for him. Mary had repeatedly sat at his feet listening to his sagacious words. So close were they to him in their mutual friendship and adoration that, when Lazarus had become sick unto death and Jesus was notified of his illness, Mary and Martha were grieved that Jesus had lingered two days before he made the two days journey to their home in Bethany. John 11—the chapter before our passage this morning—describes the incident at great length. While preaching and teaching many miles away, Jesus had received a message that Lazarus was sick, but anticipating this as an event that would demonstrate his Sonship with the Father, Jesus lingered two days longer. By the time he and his disciples arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb four days. His sisters and the Jews who were comforting them, feeling immeasurable sorrow, mildly reprimanded him with the observation that had he been there Lazarus would not have died. Jesus was deeply moved and he wept, not only for Lazarus but also for the Jew's lack of faith. At the gravesite, Jesus orders them to take away the stone in front of the tomb. After the stone had been rolled away, Jesus stepped to the mouth of the cave and, with a loud voice, shouted, *Lazarus come out!* Subsequently, Lazarus appeared, bound with grave clothes and a napkin wrapped around his face. Jesus said, "Unbind him and let him go."

This is the same Lazarus, who in our lesson today sits at table with Jesus, the same Jesus who is at cross purposes with death, who is at cross purposes with grave clothes that are confining, with

grave clothes that bind our aspirations, dreams, and desires. Believe me! This is the Savior I want with us—the Savior who issues the command: *Unbind him and let him go! Unbind her and let her go!* For this is the one and only Savior who goes to the cross that we might be free, who is willing to die a horrid and insidious death that we might have a full and actualized life, who makes it perfectly clear to us that the purpose of his cross is to assure that we have life and have it more abundantly.

In Lazarus' Grave Clothes

Obviously none of us here has been dead and in the tomb for four days. And yet I have this haunting notion that—at some time in our lives—we have found ourselves in Lazarus' grave clothes, that we have experienced a similar confinement, a restriction placed on our most precious dreams, that we are somehow wrapped in a shroud of constraint. In point of fact, we may have discovered ourselves in Lazarus' grave clothes due to disguised invitations to die.

Sidney Jourard, former Professor of Psychology at the University of Florida, contends that “people destroy themselves in response to an invitation originating from others to stop living.”ⁱⁱ Almost all of these invitations are subtle. An invitation—issued in bad faith—as a fantasy wish will be communicated non-verbally, sub-orally, or as indifference. In effect, what may be communicated by one person to another is a non-verbal nonchalance that is tantamount to cold indifference, which is as good as saying:

it makes little difference to me if you continue to exist or

you are no longer useful to me or

you are simply in the way or

it makes little difference to me what you think or what you say.

Laing and Esterson—in a study titled *Sanity, Madness, and the Family*—were able to document the way family members of schizophrenic girls communicated their wish that the victims annihilate their own view of self and world and replace it with one that was alienⁱⁱⁱ. . . imposed upon them. This is to say that it is a fact that here are people who live in a milieu where others continue to issue invitations to die. It happens to you and me.

Unbound and Free

In direct contrast, one of the most beautiful aspects of the Messiah was that he continually extended invitations to live, never an invitation to die:

- *Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men* was an invitation to live.
- *Come, Peter, come to me on the water* was an invitation to live in the midst of the tempest.
- The raising of Jairus' daughter was an invitation to live.
- *Take up your cross and follow me, for they who will save their lives will lose them, and they who lose their lives for my sake will find them* is an invitation to live.
- Jesus' words to the woman with an issue of blood—*your faith has made you well*—was an invitation to live.
- To the penitent thief on the cross Jesus offered an invitation to live: *I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*

The purpose of Jesus' cross is self-evident here: to unbind us and let us go, to free us from sin and decay, to liberate us to live freely.

During the months of November and December, the Metropolitan Opera Company performed Leoš Janáček's opera titled *From the House of the Dead*, based on Dostoyevsky's novel titled *The House of the Dead*, a fictionalized account of his experience in a Siberian prison. On the first page of Janáček's musical score, he printed a quotation from Dostoyevsky: *In every human being a divine spark—a spark of God*. The Artistic Director of Janáček's opera maintained that Janáček draws us in to identify with the prisoners in the Siberian prison camp, since we in our own versions of confinement can empathize with their shame, guilt, need for sustenance, struggles with ego-centrism, unkindness, and forgiveness. In one of the final tableaux, a group of tattered, ailing inmates in the prison hospital release a wounded eagle they have nurtured back to health, only then as prisoners to be corralled by guards into a quick march to the work fields. How passionately, however, their spirits soared into freedom with the restored eagle.

Unbind him, and let him go. The purpose of Christ's cross? To set us free . . . free to live fully actualized lives. The wind that blows across the windswept hill of Golgotha is the wind of the Holy Spirit that blows upon that divine spark in every human being, that it may grow into an affirming flame of liberating faith.

Conclusion

Look at Lazarus. Look at Lazarus sitting at supper with Jesus and other visitors in Lazarus' house. Look at Lazarus. Study him. Examine his features. Observe his countenance.

Does he have a vacant look? No. Are his eyes vacuous? No.

They are penetrating, for they see beyond the confining limits of this world. Inherent now in his gaze is the satisfaction of knowing what no one else knows, of having seen what no one else has seen,

of having been where no one else has been, of having visited that undiscovered country from which no one else has ever returned.

Lazarus has experienced firsthand the triumph of life, the Savior's call to come forth, and the divine spark that glows into an affirming flame. Actually, all of that was enough to make Lazarus laugh.

All of this is enough to make us free and to delight in the liberating power of faith.

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Fifth Sunday in Lent
21 March 2010

Notes

ⁱ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

ⁱⁱ Sidney M. Jourard, from chapter titled *The Invitation to Die* in his book *The Transparent Self*, pp. 93-94

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, cited by Jourard, p. 97