



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The more I try to follow Jesus, the more I am convinced of the unique value of each and every human being. Even us sinners, those who deny Him, betray Him and put Him to death are beloved children in His sight. Christianity is all about finding God in and through our flesh. It is about a God who meets us and befriends us exactly where we are.

For the last several Sundays, we have heard from John's Gospel. That's the very same gospel where we hear that the word became flesh. Just last Sunday, we heard about Jesus healing the man born blind, the week before, we heard about his encounter with the woman at the well, and before that we heard about His meeting with Nicodemus in the middle of the night.

And then there's today. Today we see Jesus weeping and groaning with Mary and Martha over the death of Lazarus, His friend. In this story in particular, we see just how deeply Jesus enters into our flesh. By becoming truly human, Jesus comes to share our suffering and grief. He lives and dies as one of us. He triumphs in our flesh. He rises from the dead.

About 30 years ago, I knew a professor who taught a bunch of courses on the fourth Gospel. Now, among scholars, there is this debate about the identity of the beloved disciple whose testimony stands behind this unique version of the story of Jesus. Ancient Christian tradition says He is the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, but this professor insisted that the beloved disciple is almost certainly Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha.

Makes sense if you think about it. Among other things, this explains the part of the story where the disciples come to Jesus and tell Him that the one whom you love is ill. Throughout the gospel, the evangelist is identified simply as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He is never given any other name. Identifying the beloved disciple as Lazarus also explains the central role his story plays in the gospel. Raising him from the dead is the last and greatest of the signs that Jesus does in chapters two through 11. It forms a bridge between the so-called book of signs and the Book of Glory, which begins with the foot washing in the 13th chapter.

The Book of Glory is all about the saving mysteries of Holy Week at Easter. Soon Jesus will be lifted up on the cross to draw all people to Himself. Soon the love of God will be unveiled in the sight of all nations. Jesus comes to us in our flesh. He lives and dies in our flesh. He rises again in our flesh. That is what the glory of God is all about – the love of God coming into the world and transforming us where we are in our flesh.

This points us to the central affirmation of the gospel that God so loved the world. God loves the world and everyone in it. People from every language, every tribe, every family and nation. God so loved the world. As Catherine Mowry LaCugna once wrote, “The very nature of God, the very nature of God is to seek out the deepest possible communion and friendship with every last creature.” And so, the sacraments of the church are taken from daily life. They involve our basic needs like bathing and eating. They make use of such simple gifts as water, oil, bread, and wine. They involve human loves and human relationships. And that means making, breaking, and keeping promises. The sacraments embody God's own love and forgiveness for us all. They bring the life-changing gift of Jesus to bear on our lives and our struggles.

Lately, I've been reading a lot of literature, mostly lyric poetry. In the past week or so, I've been spending some time with the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation, and I came across Lawrence Ferlinghetti's Populist Manifesto. The document dates from 1976, the bicentennial year of our nation's birth, and in it Ferlinghetti, who at the age of 25, commanded a naval vessel during the Normandy invasion, asks the following question: where are Whitman's wild children? Where are the great voices singing out with a sense of sweetness and sublimity? Where is the great new vision, the great worldview, the high prophetic song of the immense earth and all that sings in it?

By invoking Whitman's wild children, the poet calls to mind the founding father of a distinctively American poetry, who is both the litmus of our democracy and the great elegist of Lincoln. Ferlinghetti does so in order to give voice to the high prophetic song of the immense earth and all that sings in it. And that should remind us of Ezekiel's dream for the renewal of Israel. In a time of national disaster, he dreams of it. In a time of conquest and defeat, he dreams of it. In a time of violence, he tells us this vision. These bones are the house of Israel, he declares. They say our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. Therefore, thus says the Lord. I will open your graves. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live. You shall live.

Recently, I've also been reading a collection of short stories by transgender authors in preparation for some workshops here at Christchurch. In the introduction to that anthology, the editors note that for all their manifest differences, each story has a trans character growing, changing, and making a

difference in the world, rather than just letting the world happen to them. Here too, we hear bits of high prophetic song. Here too, we catch glimpses in each particular human story of an expansive vision for our world.

In an era filled with various forms of violence, exclusion, and despair, the ability to tell our own stories and to listen with empathy to others is a much needed spiritual discipline. That's what's so important about the Faith in Detroit initiative, telling stories is one of the ways in these deeply troubling times that we practice hope and solidarity with our neighbors. Christian community means breaking bread with all kinds of people. It means sharing our own stories and yes, the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

It's a story that's all about love. It's a story that is all about death and resurrection. As Michael Curry used to say, “If it's not about love, it's not about God.” Following Jesus means keeping alive the witness to His love and the spirit of prophecy. It's about keeping alive the living prophetic word. For that word connects us in a cosmic vision of God's shalom and God's salam. A peace that involves harmony and justice and right relationship with our neighbors. By giving and receiving these gifts, we become more fully human. We become more fully ourselves.

One of the most insightful readers of the fourth Gospel is Origen. This theologian who was born in 185 AD and died around 253, was the greatest biblical scholar in the early church. Other than perhaps Jerome, he has no equal in antiquity. He learned Hebrew before Christians went back to doing that. He sat at the feet of rabbis and, among other things, he taught that in the end, God saves every last one of us. For Origen, we all come from God, and so we all go back to God through Jesus.

Centuries later, Origen was condemned by a church council, but in his own day he was considered a pillar of orthodoxy. In fact, when he was just 18 years old, he was made head at the Catechetical School at Alexandria, one of the major centers of early Christian learning, Jewish learning too. Ever since, his writings have been treasured for his many insights into the Christian life. Here's a bit of what he says about the story we just heard taken from the 11th chapter of John:

“Now we ought to be aware,” he writes, “that there are some Lazaruses even now, who after they have become Jesus's friends have become sick and died. And as dead persons, they have remained in the tomb and the land of the dead. And later they were made alive by Jesus's prayer and were summoned from the tomb to the things outside it by Jesus with his loud voice. The one who trusts in Jesus,” he continues, “comes forth wearing bonds worthy of death and still bound around his face, so that he can neither see nor walk nor do anything because of the bonds of death until Jesus commands those who are able to unbind him and let him go.”

In other words, Christianity is about more than just being forgiven. That's just the beginning. When Jesus raises us from the dead and makes us His friends, that's only the beginning of life in Him. We emerge from the tomb with the rags and stench of death still clinging to us, but Jesus meets us there and He calls us by name out into the new and better way of love. He invites us again and again into deeper union with Himself. He invites us to share God's gift of freedom that will make us fully alive, and He invites us to pass that gift on to others too.

“Unbind him and let him go,” Jesus says to the disciples. Lazarus must no longer be blinded and hobbled by the close of the grave. We too, today, we too need to lay these things aside and to follow Jesus more closely. The integrity of our witness depends on it, but we never, ever follow Jesus alone. The church as a community is central to the gospel. None of us is ever saved alone. Though Christ alone is our Savior who sets us free from death, it is our siblings who must help Him to remove our bonds. They are the ones who show us how to love. They are the ones who encourage us to follow behind Jesus.

The other night, Pastor Manisha was reminding some of us of the importance of direct communication in the Christian life. For we are flesh and blood people, and God calls us to build each other up in love so that we may faithfully pursue God's mission together. That is so important because the ways of sin and death still cling to us. With one foot, we have stepped out into the light with Jesus, but the other foot remains planted in the grave. The grave close could be our self-centered ways, our attachment to wealth. They could be our abuse of personal power to hold other people down. They could be our deeply held resentments and the human divisions we all engage in. They could be our desire for status or our ideologies of exclusion and control. Or they could be – they could be false humility and self-abnegation. They could be anger, lust, greed, or pride. You know the list, it doesn't really matter.

What matters is that these things cling to us and block our vision. They continue to do so even after Jesus has called us from the tomb. We need other people. We need each other to help us see clearly. We need other people to help us grow in God's ways, and that is what this gathering is all about. The Holy Eucharist assembles us in one place so that we all may be fed at God's table so that the gifts of grace may be renewed in us. Gathered together around the table on the Lord's day, the day of resurrection, we catch sight of God's vision for the world.

Martin Luther King called it beloved community. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. We need each other to pursue that vision. We need the mothers and fathers of Israel showing us how to confess the one true God, and to answer the call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We need the prophets calling us back again and again to the needs of our neighbors, especially the least of these. We need John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, pointing to Jesus

and showing us the way. And we need Mary, that unwed mother, answering God's call with her wholehearted yes. We need the apostles dropping everything to fish for people and follow the Lord. We need the martyrs bearing witness to Jesus at the cost of their own lives.

All of these people, unique individuals, each with a unique story. We need, especially, the witnesses of the Civil Rights movement and the freedom struggles of recent centuries. We need those who put their bodies on the line for their neighbors. We need those who break down the walls that divide us, who build bridges among human beings. We need the saints of Christ Church Cranbrook, the holy ones who surround us in this place past, present, and yet to come.

They are the ones, however imperfectly, who help us shed the clothing of the grave. They're the ones who show us what freedom is like. They're the ones who show us how to love. With them, we too can lay our burdens down. We too can renounce the attitudes and behaviors that hold us back. We too can be set free in Jesus. “Unbind them,” He says. “Unbind them and let them go.”

Amen.