

One Whom You Love

5th Sunday in Lent; Series A

John 11:17-27; 38-53

You have heard the story before. A group of blind men are asked to touch the elephant immediately in front of them and describe the object. The men assert the elephant is either like a pot (the blind man who felt the elephants' head), a winnowing basket (ear), a plowshare (tusk), a plow (trunk), a granary (body), a pillar (foot), a mortar (back), a pestle (tail) or a brush (tip of the tail). The story has been used to illustrate that one's subjective experience can be true, but that such experience is inherently limited by its failure to account for a totality of the truth.

Today we heard the account of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. It reminds me of my first real experience with a topic we might call "an elephant in the room." It is the topic of death. I was in sixth grade. I can tell you every detail even though the death I am talking about happened close to twenty years ago. I can tell you that it was a rainy December Saturday morning. I remember coming downstairs and asking my older brother and sister where Mom and Dad were. I can remember the sick feeling in my stomach that I felt and the terror that rushed over me when I heard the answer, "They are at Grandma's house." My Grandma had been fighting a bout of breast cancer for a while and so I was pretty sure that the reason my parents were over there that early in the morning was because she had died. It was an experience I will never forget. I am sure you have your own similar experiences.

In our Gospel reading we heard about a variety of experiences and interpretations of the same event, the death of Lazarus. In the reading Lazarus was described as "he whom Jesus loves" (vs.3). Just as we all have many different reactions, interpretations, and experiences involving the death of a loved one, so too our Gospel reading presents us with a range of interpretations regarding the death of one whom Jesus loves.

Experts in the discipline of psychology tell us that human beings experience five natural stages of grief whenever someone dies—denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Our interpretations, actions, and thoughts that surface as a result of experiencing the death of a loved one often cover all five of these stages at one time or another. Like blind people trying to process and describe a giant animal before them, we might stumble our way through processing the elephant in the room that is the topic of death.

In our Gospel reading we learn about a variety of different expectations people had about how Jesus was supposed to handle the event of the death of Lazarus. In verse 21 Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Another time Mary, the sister of Martha, says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (vs.32). Some of the crowd said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying" (vs.37). Yet, Jesus confronts the death of Lazarus directly.

I was at a funeral a while back in which the pastor took this tact. He confronted death very directly. It was actually hard not to confront it directly because it was an open casket funeral. He addressed the entire congregation and said plainly, "You are going to die." He even had all of us say it together. It was uncomfortable. It was raw. It was unpleasant. But it was the truth and no one could deny it. Even our subjective experiences could testify to the truth.

Similar to this, Jesus confronts the topic of death directly. He hears that Lazarus, “one whom he loves” (vs.3), is dead. He makes arrangements to go and do something about it. We even read that “Jesus wept” upon his visit to the tomb of Lazarus (vs. 35). Then our Lord had the stone removed and prayed to the Father. He models this for us in that he took all of his grief and sorrow, emotions, and feeling about the death of his beloved friend and gave them to the Heavenly Father in prayer. Jesus confronts death directly and in prayer to the Heavenly Father. Yet, we also learn that he confronts the death of Lazarus so that he can overcome it.

Many of you I am sure are familiar with the movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*. It was produced in the mid 1970's and is a very reverent account of the life and work of Jesus using the Gospel accounts. It is over six hours long! I have seen the movie a couple of times and I recommend that you watch it as well; maybe you can see it this Easter. If I am not going to watch the entire movie in one sitting I will at least skip to the scene of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. When you factor in the acting, the scenery, the camera angles, and the music, the viewer is left with one intense scene that culminate in the words of Jesus that we heard this morning, “Lazarus, come forth” (Jn 11:43). It is powerful! The scene demonstrates the resolve of God in Christ to confront death and the power of God in Christ to overcome it. First, Jesus does this in his Ministry by raising people from the dead, as he did for Lazarus. Then, Jesus does this definitively in his own resurrection from the dead, never to die again.

Something else incredible happened at the event of Lazarus' resurrection from the dead. Actually, an incredibly ironic thing happened. From that moment of Lazarus' resurrection we learn that the Jews planned to put Jesus to death. Bringing Lazarus to new life and freeing him from death sealed Jesus' certain death in Lazarus' place. Jesus brings Lazarus out of the tomb so that he can go in. Jesus overcomes death with the resurrection of Lazarus even as he himself is moving toward Jerusalem and bringing about his own death and resurrection from the dead for you and for a whole world in Sin.

When Mary, the sister of Martha, first approached Jesus to tell him about Lazarus' death, she said, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (vs.3). And then Jesus did something about it. He didn't confront Lazarus' death in the way Mary and Martha anticipated. God doesn't work on our timeline, he has his own. Yet, he emphatically and definitively confronted death for the sake of one whom he loves.

The words of Jesus to Nicodemus echo in our ears, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . .” (Jn 3:16). Through the person and work of Jesus God confronts death with his own death and resurrection even for you. You are numbered among those sick with the chronic disease of Sin. You are numbered among those whom Jesus loves. And so he works mightily to confront and conquer death personally for you through the watery grave of your baptism and the promise of eternal life that he attaches to those waters. You are crucified with Christ and raised to new life (Rom 6:4).

We now have the privilege of presenting all sicknesses and illnesses, among our other needs, to our Lord in prayer. Now we are able to confront death with the power of the Gospel that has victory over it. We bring the sicknesses and illnesses of our loved ones to our God who has confronted Sin, death, Hell, and the devil for us and has conquered it all. Now in prayer we can simply speak these words to our Lord, confident that he hears us and cares about what we are asking: “Lord, one whom you love is ill.” Have mercy, O' Lord. Amen.