

Lent 5A March 29 2020
John 11:1-45
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God who is love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray: Loving Father, Jesus tells us that if we believe we will see your glory. Untie the cloth that binds our feet and wraps our faces, so that, like Lazarus, we will see your glory when you raise us to life everlasting. Amen.

Ah! The raising of Lazarus from the dead. What's this story all about? Come on Saints, even though I can't see you, I can hear the cogs grinding! ... Yes, that's right! It's about resurrection. Jesus' power to resurrect Lazarus, Jesus power to resurrect our lives, and a foreshadowing of his own resurrection – with bonus bits! - the resurrection of Lazarus gives the Pharisees a headache, just as the resurrection of Jesus gives the devil a stinker! Now that we've got that out of the way, I want to explore the question, "Why?" Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Does Jesus need to pull headline grabbing stunts for attention, or is there something more sincere, genuine, authentic, going on here?

While the message of resurrection is unmissable in St John's account of "Raising Lazarus", and Jesus' use of "day-light-seeing" and "night-darkness-stumbling" allegory is masterful, there is a more subtle, yet extremely powerful message that Holy Spirit has inspired me to share with you. As I studied the text and began to compose the sermon for today, I drew on the obvious themes and rhetorical techniques and things were progressing well... sort of. If you call wrestling with God at Peniel and scoring a limp for your trouble, "progressing well."

I couldn't ignore the recurring voice interrupting my thoughts saying, "Have another look, Greg. Have a good, hard, Mummy look! Tell my beloved children what *I* want them to hear." So I looked, and the words drew me deeper into God's heart. "*Lord, he whom you love is ill*"... *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus... he [Jesus] was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved... Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* Sometimes we forget that although this gospel is showing how much God loves Lazarus, Mary, and Martha; the real story today is how much the Lord loves us.

"Lord, he whom you love is ill." And, that's why we gather as church. We feel a sickness, a sadness, and a brokenness and we hear the scripture say, "*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*" We always think, "Okay, Lazarus is sick"; but it's not really just about Lazarus. It's also about us. It's about God's great love for us ... God's great love for us ... "*he whom you love is ill.*" Jesus loved Martha and her sister, Mary and their brother, Lazarus. Jesus wept and the Jews said, "*See how he loved him.*"

Unlike "phileos" (friendship love), Jesus expresses "agape" (selfless love), a heartfelt yearning, the love of the Father who gave up his Son for the sake and salvation of creation. Agape is love that wields the power to raise and create new life.

When we're asked about the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, it's common for us to say that the power of God raised Lazarus. That's true, but not in the way most people understand it. God doesn't need to display his power in a way that creates fear and awe. The whole of creation is testimony to that. I rather believe, that the love of God raised Lazarus, just as God's love sent Jesus to the cross and raised him, to save us. God raises because God loves. God loves life, and God loves you. God will raise you up. He did at your first baptism when he gave you new life, and he will at your second baptism when he glorifies you in eternity.

All of us come to God with our own situations, and we need to be raised up. We may come sick. We may come sad. We may even feel spiritually dead. And today, the Lord's love will raise us up. Remember, every time you hear Mary and Martha say, "Lord, he whom you love is ill"; they're talking about you and me.

God is the source of love. "God is love" says (1 John 4:8). We've been taught that since we were small children. God is love. He is the source of all love. (Galatians 5) says, "the fruit of the Spirit is love" [:22], and "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" [:6]. So, where does love come from? God; only God. And what is love supposed to do? Raise us up! When we're down, broken, worried, God's love heals us and raises us up.

You see, you won't find love in people or things they do – in girls, boys, husbands, wives, money, achievements, success – unless the Lord is behind it. Whatever we're looking for in life; whatever we're trying to achieve; if we're reaching for a relationship we're hoping for; even if we're in a marriage but it's not working out very well; unless the Lord is the source of the love, we will struggle.

So, whatever we're trying to do; whatever we're trying to achieve; whatever relationship we're in or want to be in, if God isn't behind it, there's no love. He's got to be the centre. We have to bring him into the centre. If we have a job, we have to bring him into the centre. If we're at school, he's got to be in the centre. In the midst of the anxiety and uncertainty swirling around us at the moment, we have to bring him into the centre. Anything that we do, God has to be the centre. Then his flame of love will consume anything that doesn't need to be there.

So, if I'm not connected to him, I'll never be raised up, like Lazarus. My relationship won't be healed. I'll be trying to achieve things in my life that have no goal, at the end. God is love. Unless we know him, unless we have him, all of our friendships and relationships and our goals – unless he's central, then we're missing everything.

God is love. His love gives us victory (1 Corinthians 15:57). His love gives us eternal life (John 3:16). And his love gives us all things (Romans 8:32-33). Wow! Even in (2 Corinthians 8:9), we hear that Jesus became poor for our sakes, so that by his poverty we might become rich. God is the source of all love.

“He whom you love is ill.” Imagine you’re ill. Not too hard, is it? Maybe physically. Maybe spiritually. Maybe psychologically. The good news? The Lord loves you; he will heal you; he will raise you up, today. That’s what happens when we worship. That’s what happens when we gather around God’s Word. Worship is for healing; to receive God’s love, and to be risen. Let me create an illustration of how this happens:

We all know that steel is a very hard metal, okay? Now let’s personify the story. Play along with me. One day, Mr Axe said, “I can break the steel.” So, he tried his hardest. Whack! He hit the steel. Nothing. Again, whack! Nothing. All Mr Axe achieved was a blunt edge. Then along came Mr Saw. “Move over” said Mr Saw. “Let me take care of this.” So, he began to move back and forth across the steel with his teeth, all his teeth, and he broke them all off. Next, Mr Hammer came along. Boom! “I’m going to pound this steel” he said. Boom! Mr Hammer’s head went flying. Finally, Mr Flame of Fire came along and said, “Hey, you lot don’t have a clue what you’re doing. Let me take care of this. Let me show you.” So, Mr Flame of Fire worked around the steel - slowly, slowly, slowly, until the steel began to melt.

That’s what God’s love does. It melts anything in our life that’s hurting us. His love is a flame. It’s a fire. And when it works around us, it starts to melt anything hard. Any emptiness, sadness, death, sins, guilt. God’s flame of love. Sometimes, only the flicker of a candle is required. At other times, a raging fire is needed.

The gospel today talks about how much Jesus loves Lazarus, and, how much he loves us. Do you remember how much? Let me remind you. “[Jesus] was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (John 11:33). God, who is love, was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Just as God, who is love, “was deeply moved for his dear son, Ephraim [Israel]” (Jeremiah 31:20). God, who is love, is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, for you, his children. Friends, we aren’t talking about a match being struck here. We’re not talking about the candles flickering on the altar either. We’re talking about a raging fire, an inferno of God’s passion and love. A raging inferno would bring Lazarus back to life. A raging inferno of divine love and passion will raise you up to eternal life. Jesus is coming to raise us up.

What raised Lazarus wasn’t only power. It was love. Great love. What’s going to raise you and me today; to everlasting life? The same fire of God’s love, an eternal fire that can never be extinguished. Today, as much as ever in our living memory, is the time, as our dear chairman, Brenton Chomel reminded us last Sunday, to make (Romans 8:38,39) our faith’s acclamation: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the **love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**” Why? Because “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who **loved us**” (Romans 8:37). Amen.

And the love of God, which incinerates all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.