

Unbinding Our Own Selves

Please know this sermon was written to be preached and not for publication. Thus, when you read it, please understand the punctuation and syntax may not be grammatically perfect. ~ Rev. Emily J. Kellar

In today's text...we read of Lazarus...and of his sisters...and of his death...and Jesus, Rabbi, teacher...crying tears over the death of his friend...humanity before us.... can you imagine? Lazarus has been dead for four daysno other section of the sacred text shows Jesus so deeply full of emotion....his full divinity and full humanity meeting in the expression of his grief....and Jesus did not just cry but he wept....the very name Lazarus in Hebrew means God Will Help....I have always imagined that the tears of Jesus must have had a profound effect on Marywe are reminded here of the verse in Psalm 34:18 that God is near the broken hearted....that God is not only the one who collects our tears in a bottle as it says in Psalm 56 but in the Christ, God also sheds tears on our behalf....and Lazarus has been dead 4 days and that is when Jesus was able to get there.... his close friend entombed already....

Jesus leans down into the tomb and asks Lazarus to come out... and Lazarus came out... and Jesus says to the disciples "Unbind him and let him go"....Lazarus' body became a revelation of the living God....Lazarus had become ill and died before the end of his natural life span....it wasn't fair...his family grieved...like ours would do....and Jesus' voice reached him and summoned

him...not bc his life was any more deserving than anyone else but bc his work on this earth was not completed....I wonder who Lazarus became? Did he become a walking saint? Did he go on to live in different ways...walking in the footsteps of his friend, the rabbi.... No matter how he lived out his life.... he certainly bore witness to God's love with his every breath....as long as he walked the earth ...Lazarus was an avatar of God's mercy....

We too are asked to be avatars of God's mercy.....our vocation as saints of God is no less or no greater than Lazarus....brought to life by the Christ...the Light of the world...we bear God in our hearts, bodies, and spirits...in spite of our flaws and failings we bear the Christ out in to this world....and others around us bear the Light for us as well...we are reminded of our interconnectedness with ALL people....the loss of any is lament for all....and no one should tread the path of grief alone....we affirm continually that every image bears the face of God....and that ALL people are holy....all bodies are holy and sometimes there are saints among us....

My mother, father and I were walking back from the Fox Theater late one night in downtown Atlantait was the early 70s....as we walked along...I saw a unhoused person ahead of us sitting on the sidewalk....his back against a building....she must have seen him too in the distance....I can still remember walking between my parents down the sidewalk....as we moved closer to the man....my mother on my right....she gracefully dropped her right shoulder and the

heavy satin lining of her coat swiftly slid off her right arm.....the coat slid off her back and the other arm in one swift quiet motion...and she quietly leaned down and wrapped her coat around the man's shoulders... then clasped his hands in hersshe gave him some cash and uttered a blessing.....she stood up and we walked on down the street....me between the two of them....holding hands again....one of us without a coat....no mention of what just happened bc it was just natural...it was effortless....it was the way she lived.....and we got in the car to head home in the night...

You see my mother came about it honestly....helping those without....it was something she learned by watching when she was growing up....this giving....this helping....my mother used to stand in the dining room of her grandparent's home.....her face pressed up against the floor length windows that over looked a long covered back porch that spanned the width of the family home on Merrimon Avenue in Asheville North Carolina....my mother would watch the folks on the porch eagerly awaiting her small task....her grandmother would come and hand her a basket of rolls and tongs..... "now Anne", she would say "these people are people just like you and me....they are down on their luck and need a good meal and some conversation....so look them in the eye and say hello and serve them...remember, we are all the same in this world....mercy and compassion are what we offer here in this home"....

My mother would walk along the back porch handing rolls to each of the folks.....their plates perched on their knees covered with white linen napkins....eating a hot mid-day meal off of fine china and using silver flatware....my mother loved handing out rolls to the folks who wandered into town by way of the railwayit was known all over town that if you made your way to the back porch of the house at the top of the hill on Merrimon Avenue that my great grandmother would serve you a hot mid-day meal.....no questions askedfriends would whisper about how my great grandmother, Ms. Leila was foolish and did not even mind if her fine silver slipped into the pockets of the men....and truly she did not care...she used to say ‘if they need it that bad they should take it’....perhaps watching this as a small child on a frequent basis was the inspiration for my mother’s work with the unhoused in Atlanta for almost forty five years....silently...selflessly....with no hesitation...that coat slid off her shoulders.....she unbound herself from the trappings of the world....she learned it from watching her grandmother feed the unhoused off the back porch....this life of service...

I sat once in a dark meditation room surrounded by icons of the Saints....I was at a clergy retreat outside Baltimore....some of the typical saints were depicted on the walls along with some modern day saints....Mother Theresa....Teresa of Avila....St. Francis....St. Clare....Martin Luther King Jr....Oscar Romero....Gandhi....Dorothy Day.....I thought of those who have walked before

us and those who walk among us....and those who will come long after we have left this earth....the saints in this life.....Nadia Bolz Weber reminds us in her book, *Accidental Saints* that “never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him. He always sent the stumblers and the sinners. I find that comforting” Nadia goes on to say. He sent the imperfect.... people just like us. People trying to live in gospel ways...

We don't have any perfect people here this morning....what makes us followers of the way of Love is not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through flawed people...God's ability to unbind us from ourselves....for God did not enter our world of snowy silent peace on eartha suspended reality of Christmas...but rather God “slipped into the vulnerability of skin and entered our violent and disturbing world”....and when we put aside religion and the horrific past of using religion to start wars and damage entire peoples...when we realize that we should not let our own religious story inflate us for we are not any better bc of our story....when we forget about denominations and insurance policies for some life after this.....when we take everything away...when we unbind ourselves.....we are left with the Gospel...which says we are to live our lives in the service of other....letting the other people go in traffic without yelling and honking....holding the door at the post office for no other reason than because we can....feeding and clothing the poor....not just writing a check from our comfort zones but getting our feet on the ground and going....making a meal for

the Dwelling Place....gathering supplies for Backpack Heros....using our church kitchen to cook for those in need....making sandwiches for outdoor church....opening our doors to 12 step programs.... inviting a neighbor we don't know to a meal here.... serving at the local food pantry.... maybe using the space here for a hospice home for the dying who have no one else and no resources...

As a friend of mine always reminds her congregation 'you didn't hire me to represent you out in the world to do religious things for you....you called me....God called me... to walk in Gospel ways right alongside you serving in the world'....not judging...not worrying about whether someone takes an extra meal at the Dwelling Place....we are called to unbind ourselves and go....living a new life like Lazarus....for "God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for our own selves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over." God pushes us out into the world saying go be love.... go be love...without fanfare.... or credit given.... or awards or attention drawn.... just simply go.... may we unbind ourselves and seek to serve those out in the world and those right before us on the porches of our lives.... amen.