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John 11

The Lutheran Church of the Messiah

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*Good morning, I come to you as a servant of Christ and of this church; I pray that the gospel of the Lord be balm for the wounded, refuge for the newcomer. Amen*

* Derrick Kayongo was born in Uganda and lived a peaceful, happy childhood with his parents a seamstress and a printer; and his two sisters. But when unrest broke out at the end of dictator Idi Amin’s reign there was violence and bloodshed. Another casualty of war was the scarcity of common staples - commodities - like sugar, salt and soap.
* Derrick, 10 years old when the conflict arouse, remembers the inability to obtain soap to was his hands or bathe regularly. Due to the unsanitary conditions Derrick suffered from chronic bouts of diarrhea.
* But the most traumatic memories for young Derrick was the dead bodies he had to step over to get to school and the finally, the abduction of his father by corrupt police.
* Eventually, with his mother and two sisters, Derrick fled Uganda to a refugee camp in neighboring Kenya, a country south of Uganda.
* This is where he met an American missionary, who was also sort of displaced from the comfort of her home in Pittsburgh. But her displacement was voluntary. She had left the US to tend to children left homeless in Kenya. This missionary witnessed something special in Derrick. She often asked him to give sermons at the camp and reminded him over and over again that even in his poverty and lack he “had much to offer and give back.” In his situation she saw the reminisce of life in this newcomer even when others saw a dead end. She believed, and she loved Derrick…..

**Jesus Loved Them**

Our text today tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus.

“They sent for him for the one whom he loved was ill.”

I want you to understand that these were not the average spectators or desperate curious bystanders who had heard about a rumored great teacher, a magician, a healer on the prowl… these were people who knew Jesus, who recognized him as the Messiah. Jesus knew them. They knew he was the one capable of saving their brother’s life.

But unlike most of us who when we get the news that a loved one is ill or has had an accident, we drop everything and run to be at their side even knowing in most cases our powerlessness to heal or snatch them from the clutches of death…. We go immediately, but Jesus did not, he lingers around Jerusalem. Many get hung up here and asked why? Why did the one who could heal procrastinate? A few verses later, Jesus almost impatiently answers that he must wait, so that you may believe. The disciples and listeners need to become witnesses of this miracle, like John the Baptist in John chapter 1, who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through Jesus.

If Lazarus had been healed of his illness, we have an ordinary miracle, and we are nearing a time in which Jesus must make it clear that he is the light and the life, He is making a strong claim of his person. Through him we have life – not merely good health.

**They Arrive**

Upon their arrival into town, Jesus is met by Martha, and she is disappointed that her beloved friend, the Messiah has missed his opportunity to heal Lazarus. She is simply asking for a healing… it is as if she hadn’t considered the possibility of a resurrection here and now on earth. But Jesus in this moment of tension ask Martha if she believes in him, does she believe that he is the life and the resurrection and if those who die will live? Now, although the hearer thinks this is not the time to discuss theology, what we should believe, we are told during this interlude something powerful. John’s gospel is heavy with “I AM” statements to indicate that we are identifying Jesus as the Messiah the one who has been sent to fulfill God’s purpose of giving us life by reconciling us to God. That even life can be breathed into dry bones, that nothing, not even death can separate us from the life giving love of God.

There are many angles of this text that can be preached it is rich with characters of whom we can relate to or condemn. But today I ask you not if you are Mary or Martha, the disciples or Lazarus, I ask you to consider that you are the Jews. The ones who wept and mourned with Mary and Martha while Jesus lingered. The Jews are eyewitnesses of this final miracle in the Gospel of John and they are there in hoards. This is where the text calls us into the intimate story of four friends, where we are invited to join in the witnesses of the resurrection.

**The Gospels of Lent**

The Lenten Gospels this year that began with Nichodemus coming in the dead of the night with no one around to inquire about who Jesus is and his purpose reveal his identity… no body witnesses this clandestine meeting

Then we are move into the story of the woman at the well, alone during the day having an encounter with the true identity of Jesus… but she announces his divinity to all who will listen when she returns home – no witnesses only her testimony.

The next week we heard the story of the blind man healed by Jesus, but this time at least the disciples are present but still no crowds appear in this story, rather he also runs to the synagogue to tell all that he can see again and has seen the living God, witnesses are called to verify his story but none step up.

John writes:

When Jesus summons Mary to leave her place of mourning, she comes but she comes with the Jews who mourned with her. She is obedient and goes into the presence of Christ but she brings a crowd.

**A crowd**

This encounter with Jesus is communal; it has moved beyond one-on-one conversions and brings the entire community along to witness the miracle first hand. It invites us to bear witness to the truth.

**Quote**

Retired Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote in his book, “The Body’s Grace”

“Life of the Christian community has its rationale – its reality – as the task of teaching us to order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.” “God gives us life so that we may help others live.”

**We Are Dead**

In other words, our Christian purpose, our collective calling is to point to the life of Christ to those who are still stiff, rotting and wrapped in funeral garb like Lazarus like ourselves when we forget our purpose of life in Christ and him in us. Williams wrote, so that others can see themselves as desired, as welcomed, as an occasion to celebrate.

Brothers and sisters, one day we will all face a physical death, but our second reading of Romans gives us hope that even in *that* death we shall not despair because we will be in the presence of Christ and the saints, but it is a resurrection from a zombie-type death that Jesus promises to call us out in a loud voice, “Get up!”

**How are we dead?**

What is a zombie-like death you may be asking?

Let’s return to Derrick’s story for a moment….

* Eventually Derrick is resettled in the United States at the age of 22. He went on to college, earned a graduate degree and gets married. His career is on the fast track. He began working for major non-profits, like CARES. He became a U.S citizen. He has two children, a boy and a girl and they have the best education, enrichment programs and are pampered. Derrick acquires luxury cars and owns a nice home near Lawrenceville in peace.
* Derrick has achieved the American dream. But his spirit was bothered. You see, whenever Derrick would have out-of-town business trips staying in American hotel chains, he would remember the lack of his countrymen.
* I don’t know if you realized this but when a guest uses one of those little pats of free soap they leave out for you at hotels, the hotel staff chucks it and puts out a fresh, new one everyday.
* Derrick was haunted by his memories of living without basic commodities like soap. His people in Uganda were still struggling to obtain soap for their basic sanitary necessities.
* But Derrick would put these thoughts away; hmm sort of ignore what he had witnessed. And often he could hear the voice of his missionary who had prophesized, “you have much to offer, much to give back.”

A zombie – like death is what we become when our focus, like Derrick’s becomes driven by worldly success, accumulation of wealth, and wallowing in our own comfort, while allowing the injustices against humanity to continue unchallenged. This is when we begin to stink of death. But like Lazarus in the tomb, we are dearly loved by Jesus and he weeps when we let harried schedules, careers, and getting ahead of the rest, or keeping up appearances keep us from finding our purpose and life in Christ.

**Hope, How do We Escape?**

How then are we to escape? How do we balance our lives so that we are living again?

Well, Romans 8 tells us that “for to set our minds on the flesh is death, but to set our mind on the spirit is life and peace.”

But let’s see if Derrick’s story offers any suggestions:

* Derrick sold his luxury vehicles, resigned from CARES and began his own non-profit called, “Global Soap Project.” Using the contacts he had made working the non-profit circuit, and having major hotel chains agreed to give Derrick those once-used pats of soap, Derrick responded to his nagging conscience. He devised a team and a system in which the soap is melted down, cleaned of pathogens, reshaped and shipped to Uganda. Soap that would have been wasted.
* He says he finally understood what the missionary had said, what she witnessed during those days at the refugee camp in Kenya.
* Derrick said, “He now knew the satisfaction of making personal sacrifices for the good of others.”

I define it as believing that Jesus is present even if his timing is not our timing. Remembering the Archbishop’s definition of Christian community, “God gives us life so that we may help others live.” We must agree to become witnesses to Jesus’ life-giving miracle even though we are caught in the grave, Jesus will call us out again, like Lazarus already bound, or Mary and the Jews who meet him on the road; He calls us to be witnesses to his Lordship.

**What Kind of Witness are we?**

The text concludes with the Jews. Some believed, others, by reported back to the Pharisees, sending Jesus to his persecution.

Here at Messiah, there are many ministries we can become witnesses to the resurrection power of Christ thereby renewing our own life. When we go and see for ourselves what Christ is doing in the lives of others, we will see the inbreaking of God. We will know that he is Lord.

I am thinking of visiting Hagar’s house and witness the transformation in the lives of homeless women and children.

I am thinking of considering accompanying Melissa to Guatemala with Days For Girls to bear witness to the empowerment that comes with learning a new skill,

I am thinking of trying to teach a Sunday school class sometimes, witnesses the reality of Jesus come alive in the heart and minds of our youth.

We have also been offered an opportunity to welcome the newcomer to our church one week this summer in a Resiliency Camp that LSG is creating for newly entering refugee children to Atlanta. We have a chance to watch the sinews, and skin return and the spirit of the Lord descend.

As a congregation we have a choice to become the witnesses who believe and find life in Christ within others reversing our own decay. Or will we be the witnesses who turn our backs on the miracles at hand. We have a choice, what sort of witnesses will we be?