

Now

A sermon by John Strommen on John 11:1-44 Feb. 18, 2018

Raising Lazarus from the dead was a whopper, bigger than the other miracles. This is the miracle that did Jesus in - the final straw, as far as the Pharisees were concerned. We learn about the Pharisees' reaction in the verses following our lesson today. We could have kept going in the reading, but we thought 44 verses were enough.

The Pharisees, you see, had a privileged position with the Romans, so everything was pretty good for them. With Jesus performing signs like he was - turning water into wine, restoring sight to the blind, and now raising someone from the dead - the Romans would surely be on alert, thought the Pharisees, thinking a new leader had arisen to challenge Rome. Then the Romans would crack down and oppress the Jews further. And if they did that, the privileged status of the Pharisees would be in jeopardy.

Or, even if the Romans didn't get riled up, might Jesus himself become more powerful than the Pharisees? The Pharisees, as they saw it, had a lot to lose. I don't want to unfairly demonize them. Maybe the Pharisees genuinely thought Israel had a lot to lose. We don't know. But it was following this story about Lazarus that the Pharisees decided they had to kill Jesus. There also began plotting to kill Lazarus, he being evidence of the life force of one Jesus of Nazareth.

So this story is a pivotal one. This was a world, in Jesus' time, when very few people had status, rights, or were allowed to share in the fruits of society. The majority of people were on the outside looking in. Women were second class citizens and there were so *very many* outcasts, from prostitutes to lepers to the blind to the poor. Foreigners were "dogs." Those with wealth or religious status were in control and presided over a social hierarchy that carefully controlled the blessings of this world, and denied them to most of the population. This was a culture lacking in equity and hope for so many. It was a culture of death, where life was denied to many people on many different levels, in order that a relative few could feast and luxuriate.

So along comes Jesus, bringing life, health, restoration and hope, to *all of the population*, for the people who need it most: the blind, the lame, the sinful and shunned, the publicly shamed, even the dead. Jesus brought nothing less than the promise of a culture of life. A kingdom that affirms life. And this kingdom of life - the kingdom of God embodied in Jesus himself - threatened those who presided over a culture set up to maintain the interests of the few who controlled the playing field, but not the interests of their fellow citizens. Their lives were marginalized, diminished and disregarded.

Without any doubt whatsoever, this is *another reason* Jesus was killed: he was crossing boundaries he wasn't supposed to cross. He was healing those who didn't deserve to be healed, forgiving those who should forever live in shame, empowering those who didn't deserve to have a life. In culture of death, human lives are the casualties. Lazarus was about the power of life.

We have just experienced another mass shooting, and with it a reminder that we live, in some respects, in a culture of death where innocent lives get erased, yet nothing is done to address it. But why? The

immediate flashpoint, and rightfully so, is with our leaders who are paralyzed and unable to address this. But before we point fingers too self-righteously, guess who elects them? This paralysis has been going on for some time. Meanwhile, a disturbed 19 year old was stockpiling a small arsenal of weaponry, some of it military grade, and then acted on his dark fantasy. And because this happens relatively easily in our country, and because it happens over and over again, that means our culture reinforces it. This is the very definition of a culture of death. And so here we are, a nation founded on Christian values, a very beacon of hope for many, abundant in resources, but also, strangely, one of the most violent nations on earth. And apparently there's no solution, we are told. This is the price of freedom! It seems to me there are some false gods lurking here that are wreaking havoc. It also is apparent to many that certain vested interests are profiting handsomely from this culture of death. And like the Pharisees, they have lots of power in this system.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he made a statement about disrupting the power of death in order to offer life. What does it mean for us to be a Christian and follower of Christ in our various cultures of death, which would be any way that our culture, the system, diminishes lives? How can we disrupt the culture of death around us and the power of death in our own lives? As we've seen with the "Me too" movement, another culture based on diminishing lives is being called out and challenged. That is God's work. Those are kingdom values.

Let's look more carefully to our story to get some more clues about what God is up to with God's promise of life.

Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he had some very interesting things to say, and heartfelt tears to shed. Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus and friends of Jesus, had each asked separately and pretty directly of Jesus why he wasn't there earlier. And when Jesus saw Mary weeping, he, too, broke down and wept. It says he was greatly disturbed in his spirit. Now, the disturbance referred to here is often underestimated. He wasn't only sad and grieving. He was aggravated, just as Martha and Mary were. Whereas the sisters were probably agitated about Jesus not being there, Jesus was agitated about death itself. Perhaps it has something to do with the common understanding and belief that death has the last word. Jesus knew that *life must have the last word, because life comes from God.*

And so, when Martha pointed out that Jesus' presence could have saved Lazarus, Jesus merely said, "Your brother will rise again."

Then Martha's confession of faith: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Then these words from Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha said, "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

I am the resurrection and the life. It's significant that he added *and the life*. Somehow, it wasn't enough to merely say, "I am the resurrection." There were many at that time who believed in the resurrection of the dead, but for Jesus' audience, and for ours as well, when we think of the resurrection of our bodies

and our lives, this means we're thinking of the *next life*. Not this life. In fact, many Christians absolutely view being a Christian as having your ticket to heaven and waiting it out. This world? It's gone to hell in a handbasket. It's lost. Let it go.

I've heard of many prominent evangelical Christians that make this mistake of dismissing the importance of this world. For instance, they won't necessarily disagree with the dangers of climate change, but they will say something like, "this world, even it floods due to human caused climate change and destroys human civilization, it doesn't matter. Our hope is in the next life." This same justification is used for the prospect of war. This world's lost already.

But when Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," by adding "the life," he meant NOW, not just in the next life. And his actions demonstrated it. His acts of healing and restoration and forgiveness, even turning water into wine, did not just point to a future reality, but also gave life to people NOW. Jesus, you see, is the way, the truth and the life. Having a relationship with Jesus is to receive life NOW in the face of a world that often kills our spirit, and then learn, live and share that life publicly! Did you recognize those words from our mission statement?

So you want to know why Jesus then walked into Lazarus' tomb and raised him up? To show everyone that he is the resurrection and the life...now. So he gave Lazarus life *now*. He called to him by name in the darkness of his sleep, in the midst of death. Death is the time when we are silenced, we humans, when no one will speak for us. Yet God through Jesus steps into death with us and calls us by name, giving us life. And Lazarus heard his voice, even in death. The sheep hear his voice, don't they? The sheep hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who leads them to still waters, who restores our soul.

No, Lazarus was not resurrected with an eternal body. He was resuscitated and brought back to life. He still died like everyone else when it was his time later. But Jesus' raising of Lazarus was a sign of two very important things: first, of resurrection in the next life, and second, of life being given right then, right there, right now.

So what happens right now in our lives, individually and collectively, matters now. For those of us, who struggle with our broken humanity – and that's all of us – Jesus offers us life right now, another narrative, a new creation of ourselves, right alongside the broken one. He calls us by name and raises up to new life when the stench of death is all around us – in our spirits and in our worlds. And collectively, in this culture of death we live in, what is happening now matters. As members of the body of Christ, we stand for, work for, bear witness to, a culture of life. A world based on the values of the Kingdom of God, where our swords are beaten into plowshares. Where there is enough for everybody. Where there is freedom and dignity for everybody. Because that's what Jesus did. He "did" life.

I close with a reference to the book we were reading for our small group, "Crossing the Bar," the author talks about a sudden and tragic death that happened in his small community. He recalls how many people make comments like, "Why did God take her now?" or "Why did God allow this?" And so it goes, when something bad happens, we automatically turn to God who must have been responsible. And yet, as the author points out, those same people don't seem to think God has anything to do with the good things in life. God's nowhere until there's a tragedy. Then it's "Why did God do it?"

To which James Johnson responds, "God didn't do it. God undid it."

Indeed, we are not spared suffering or even death, and yet we learn today that God in Jesus undid death. May you be lifted up this day by the God who gives you life right now. May you be a part of lifting up the world around us to be a better world as you live out and bear witness to the values of God's Kingdom that cultivate cultures of life. Amen.