

Lent 5-March 26, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 11:1-45

“For the Sake of the Crowd”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Last week we heard that Jesus performed a never done before miracle by opening the eyes of the blind man. You can only imagine the joy of this man who once relied on everyone for his needs, who now could begin work and care for himself. In this week’s story, Jesus performs yet another never done before miracle, the greatest of the seven signs that the gospel John records when he raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. You might think that Lazarus would be overjoyed when Jesus called his name and he came out of his tomb, but scripture doesn’t say anything about how Lazarus reacted to this miraculous event. Jesus, however, does tell us why he performed this miracle, and it wasn’t for Lazarus’ sake. It was for the sake of the crowd.

A previous member of Baltic Lutheran often greeted me on Sunday mornings by saying, “I got a question for you”. I recall one of his questions one Sunday morning was, “When I die, do I have to have a funeral?” I quickly said, “Yes”, but qualified my answer like the response Jesus gave by saying, “Well I guess you don’t, but the people who attend your funeral do.” We have funerals for the sake of the crowd.

One of my favorite books that I picked out by accident from the Mikkelson library at Augustana University for a paper I had to write on Pastoral Care was this little book called, “Weddings, Funerals, and Special Events.” I needed a couple resources to cite for this paper, so I searched for the shortest books that wouldn’t take long to read and might be helpful. This book accomplished both goals for me. I still often refer to the wisdom that the various authors of this book have taught me about what to expect in the various encounter’s pastors have with their parishioners on different occasions in their lives.

Chapter 8 is about funerals. The author began this chapter with a three-word sentence. “I love funerals.” As many of you already know about your pastor, I do too. And so does Jesus. Never is there a gathering of people whose ears are so open that want to hear what God says about death and what happens next, but at a funeral. The author of this book asserts that whenever the death of a loved one occurs, you must think about God. You may love, hate, question, be angry at, or not care much one way or another, but you will have to think about God. And without a funeral to hear what God says that is grounded in scripture, you are left with the crazy ideas and words that our culture has come to believe is what happens at the time of death.

Jesus could have prevented the death of Lazarus just as easily as he gave sight back to the blind man. But he didn’t. Jesus never mentions the blind man by name or his feelings about him. Lazarus on the other hand was a family friend of Jesus whose house he often went to. We are told in this story that Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. But what does Jesus do when he learns that Lazarus' beloved friend is gravely ill? He tells his disciples that they should go back to the town where they had just narrowly escaped death themselves. Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he is not afraid of his own death or anyone else’s. Jesus begins to reveal his ultimate purpose of bringing life out of death.

Jesus waits until Lazarus is not about to take his last breath or is just still a little warm dead, not even stone cold dead. Jesus waits four days so that you can tell that Lazarus is dead by the smell coming from his grave. Jesus attempts to teach his disciples that for him death is nothing more than sleep. They do not yet understand that Jesus simply will bring life to the dead by calling out the name of the person he wants to rise from the grave. It was for this very reason that Jesus specifically said, “**Lazarus**, come out.” instead of just saying “Come out” or else all of the graves would have been opened. Jesus must be so careful what he says, because when his words leave his mouth, things will happen.

We confess in the Apostles Creed that we believe in the resurrection of **the body** because this is what scripture informs us Jesus will do just as he did with Lazarus. Martha is the sister who often gets criticized for not doing the better things by being busy compared to her sister Mary who sits at the feet of Jesus and listens. However, when we listen carefully to the words that Martha speaks to Jesus before he gets to the tomb, she speaks words of great faith. Martha is speaking words of faith when she tells Jesus, "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Martha also makes another statement of faith when she tells Jesus, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him". She knows what Jesus can do and trusts what he chooses to do. The belief of resurrection was not new for Martha when she confessed as we do in the Apostles' Creed, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, and that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

This is when the funeral service that Jesus presides at is about to begin. Martha goes and tells Mary to also come to listen to Jesus. Mary and Martha had heard from Jesus before and therefore they believe the same things about resurrection. There is a crowd of people gathered and there is weeping. We are told that Jesus weeps too, but his weeping is not so much for the sadness of the death of Lazarus, but for the people who believe that the devil has had the last word as Lazarus took his last breath. Jesus is greatly disturbed with the people's belief that since Lazarus is gone all that is left to do is to celebrate his life.

Jesus does not replace Lazarus' funeral service with a celebration of life for Lazarus. Jesus in fact never mentions one good deal of his dear friend and I would expect Jesus would have many stories to tell about his enjoyable visits with his friend Lazarus. But this funeral service was not for Lazarus. In fact, you can't help but feel sorry for what happened to Lazarus that day. The pain of Lazarus' illness was finally gone. He was at complete rest. But Jesus doesn't raise Lazarus from his grave into heaven, instead he raises him back to earth to make him experience death for a second time. You wonder if Lazarus wanted to call the funeral home to tell them he wanted to have "Here we go again." engraved on his tombstone.

This really could be put on each of our gravestones too. We don't often think about it that way, but as we heard from the reading from Romans today, that when we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we are baptized into his death. That's right, when we are baptized, we die. We die for the first time just as Lazarus did. In baptism, Jesus puts to death in each of us the power of the devil, our sin, and our greatest enemy of all, death. Yes, death is put to death. Our second death is as Jesus told his disciples, is just a sleep.

I have been to quite a few funerals in the past couple of months and I am pleased that I have not had to officiate at all of these funerals. But I have loved the funerals that I have been at lately because the words that I heard were for the sake of the crowd. The words that I heard at these funerals were for me to hear and for the sake of the crowds to hear. Words of comfort and truth such as: Jesus is not afraid of death; therefore death is nothing for us to fear. When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death so that just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too will be united with him in a resurrection like his. We believe that death is nothing more than sleep and just as we don't know how long we sleep before we awaken, it will seem like a twinkling of an eye when we will hear Jesus speak our name and we too will rise from the dead, not back to this life like Lazarus was, but to the new life we have in heaven when tears, pain, sorrow and time itself is no more. We believe in the resurrection of the body which will happen on the last day when Jesus returns. And best of all we believe what Jesus told Mary and Martha, "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. Now that is good news. Jesus has promised this to you and for the sake of the crowd listening today. Amen.