

## ***The Sorrow of the Saints***

**John 11:32-44**

I do not know anyone by the name of Lazarus, but I do know many people who share his identity.

For me, the only other Lazarus who immediately comes to mind is the poet who penned the stirring sonnet at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Emma Lazarus seemed to intuitively understand the meaning of her surname when writing these timeless and cherished words:

...Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The name, Lazarus, means “one whom God helps.” It’s a derivative of the Hebrew name, Eleazar, of which I know but one: our Mayan friend, Eleazar Encino Perez, who visited us here a couple of times with Ricardo Mayol and is one of the leaders of the Seminario Intercultural Mayense in Chiapas, Mexico. He, too, is well named, as God certainly helps him do his good work.

There are many people, though, who are like Lazarus—many struggling souls trying to survive in a world that has already placed them in their grave. The Lazaruses of our world include those with terminal conditions and illnesses that offer no remedy or relief. People who feel like they’ve got “one foot in the grave” are already sensing as if the burial shroud is being fit for them. Those around them are speaking in hushed tones about the eventuality of their passing, long before the last breath has expired. It makes one wonder: Why is it we human beings can’t simply live in the moment

and value each other's company and presence as we often do when gloom isn't hanging over the room? Why does the laughter and good spirited conversation end before one's life does? Do we not trust that as the light grows dim, it shines more brightly beyond the grave?

There are a lot of people who will read this story about Lazarus with this in mind. They will view his rising from the grave as a sign of the life to come—assume it's only foreshadowing Jesus' resurrection; that it's about God's promised intervention after death before the grave swallows us up, so we may be delivered like Lazarus, except into that beautiful world beyond. Lazarus then becomes the proverbial Everyman—a symbol of universal human vulnerability in the face of death. Except, it's important to note, Lazarus really isn't *every* one.

In the Christian canon, the name, Lazarus, shows up only twice: here, in John, in reference to this story and in Luke, with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). What is interesting is that in Luke's parable, it's clear that the name, Lazarus, is symbolic and meant to be representative of poverty and suffering, since it stands in contrast to a demanding and arrogant rich man, who demands to be served by Lazarus in death as he was in life; yet, he garners no sympathy. Luke makes Jesus' critique quite pointed in that the poor man is identified by the name, Lazarus (he whom God helps), while the rich man remains completely nameless—a very intentional and satirical flip from the custom where the wealthy were well known in the center of society, while the poor were legion, expendable, and anonymous. But in Luke's parable, it's the poor man who was named, while the wealthy man remained nameless. One would take that to mean, between Luke's parable and John's story, Lazarus is

representative of the poor of the earth, for they were (and still are) the ones who God helps and Jesus loves.

However, being like Lazarus isn't limited to those with low-incomes. There are the poor in spirit as well. So other Lazaruses come to mind, such as those with mental illness, who can be intimidating and discomfoting to those who can't see past the illness to recognize a troubled, yet valuable, soul. They are often poor in spirit. There are single mothers rearing children without help from fathers who are in prison, or won't show up or provide anything for their own children. They are often discouraged and poor in spirit.

There are combat veterans who return home only to relive the violence, death, and fear of battle every moment of their waking lives. Haunted by violence, they are often poor in spirit.

There are sex workers, straight and gay, estranged from their families, exploited by many and cared for by few. Enslaved by manipulative and abusive forces, they are often poor in spirit.

There are nomadic refugees who have lost everything they have known and are vulnerable to the merciless exploitation of strangers. Frightened by their situation, they are often poor in spirit.

There are addicts and alcoholics, dysfunctional in many aspects of life. Out of control in so many areas of life, they are often poor in spirit.

There are Lazaruses like this everywhere: some who are homeless and others who are not welcome in their own homes; some undocumented and others feeling like they don't matter; some undereducated and other misunderstood; some malnourished in body and other hungry for meaning and purpose; those who are dying

from treatable conditions and those who suffer with deadly stigma; some who fall between the cracks of justice and others who yearn for anyone's charity. All, as they often are, are poor in spirit.

The point is, the Lazaruses of this world are those who suffer greatly, often giving into despair. They miss out on the abundant blessings and confidence in life others enjoy, simply because they were born in the wrong place, or at the wrong time, or with the wrong luck, or around the wrong people—ones who sense little hope in their present life.

Not surprisingly, many who seek God's help think it only applies at the end in the promise of Paradise from preachers who tell them that life will be better in the "sweet by-and-by." God may not deliver them from their present problems, but once they die, the gates of heaven will open and a mansion will be waiting for them—just like in Luke's parable. So the divine promise amounts to this:

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Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
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Maybe that is what was in Jesus' mind when he didn't immediately respond to the call from Mary and Martha, allowing his beloved friend, Lazarus, to die without any intervention. Such a tragedy it was, given what Jesus could have done. But then, why not let Lazarus die so he can finally end his suffering and experience his salvation from God?

Or, I suppose, Jesus' inaction could even come across as exhaustion, if not resignation, because the need was so great—so many lives suffered, that even he lacked the capacity to save everyone,

even those close to him. Maybe that is why once Jesus finally arrived and met with his sisters, Mary and Martha, he, too, was overwhelmed by the loss. You might recall this, since it's simply stated in the shortest verse of the Bible: "Jesus wept." His heart poured out in grief for the loss they were suffering, and for his own sorrow in sensing the despair of all the Lazaruses of the world. He wept. He, who possessed the power to save Lazarus, joined in on the sorrow for the one many loved, but lost.

I'm not sure we can even fully unpack the meaning of this moment, given what we know in this drama, apart from acknowledging the deep emotional pain that Jesus felt for those who needed God's help and who died without receiving it. Unfortunately, that's the sad, harsh reality of life. Those who desperately need help don't always get it until it's too late. Those who followed Jesus must have been bewildered by it all; why did this need to happen? Could Jesus do nothing?

For me, Jesus represents everyone who tries to intervene and help. We don't always show up in time. Nor do we individually possess the power to save someone. So those tears he shed mean something to us. We experience tragedy and disappointment all the time, far more than we can bear.

That's the sorrow of the saints—those who try to live their lives like Jesus—those who are responsive to human need—those who grieve at the terrible injustices, the horrible circumstances of other people's lives; the sorrow of the saints genuinely comes when things don't work out as planned or as hoped for. Sorrow often flows in tears when terrible things happen and mercy never shows and justice

is denied. The sorrow that is felt comes when we genuinely care about the Lazaruses of this world and we can't change the results. There are too many obstacles and forces at work that prevent help from coming in time. Or there are too many people who just don't care, who are apathetic or unmerciful to the plight of Lazaruses that exist in and around them. So like Jesus, all we can do is weep with those who have lost whom they have loved.

The circumstances that break the heart of Jesus are what break the hearts of saints. And if sorrow were all there is, if the status quo is all that is meant to be, then this story would have ended quite differently. If salvation is only some distant promise of an afterlife, if that is to be our only hope on earth, then Jesus would have left Lazarus alone and at peace in his tomb. He never would have healed people or challenged the status quo. In this story, he would have shed his tears, comforted the sisters with the promise of the resurrection, and then left a flower at the grave and gone on his way—if that's all the hope of God he could muster. Lazarus was already dead; his spirit was gone. If there's nothing even Jesus could do but offer God's help after death, then there isn't really any hope for this life, is there?

But this was not the message of the story in John's gospel, for that's not how it ends. Giving up and surrendering or pining for Paradise is not the way life works in God's realm, which is why Jesus went to the grave, rolled back the rock, and called Lazarus back to life—a prophetic action to end hopelessness! Like Ezekiel's vision, when life came back into Lazarus' body, when the spirit was revived, when hope was renewed, he got up out of his grave and his death shroud and cast aside the endless despair of lives just like his!

Hopelessness would not be the final epitaph for the poor and vulnerable, or for the suffering and distraught. God would restore hope and life to the Lazaruses of this world whenever the hearts of saints, just like his own, are broken enough to intervene!

I don't know about you, but there are many days when I need to hear and embrace this message to remind me that this is why you and I gather to be a beloved community of Christ—not to find our eternal rest, but to keep our hope alive that, someday, the Lazaruses of our world will have their graves opened and those of us who are with them, who witness their rising, will help unbind them and set them free from their suffering!

That's what ministry and mission is mainly about—to be God's help to the Lazaruses of this world and give them hope to rise up and claim their lives again. As you and I do our part to help people out of their despair and rise out of their graves and into the divine graces of life, we will live into the sacredness of God's own love and compassion for this world and in the process experience our own redemption from that which overwhelms and depresses the human spirit—that tells us nothing will ever change.

The perseverance of the saints is what keeps us doing good, even when it seems as if it does no good. For with the Spirit's power people around this world are resisting the soul-destructive forces of despair, apathy, callousness, hatred, bigotry, fear, shame, and incivility and everything else that seeks to depress the divine spark of life within us all. As the story of Lazarus reveals, our mission is not about recruiting people for eternal life, but to live like Jesus in service to others, bringing eternal love and strength into this life. That is

where hope makes a difference and when the salvation of our God is at hand!

This is what saints do. Every one of us. As followers of Christ, as worshippers of God, as common, ordinary saints blessed with God's extraordinary Spirit, we offer God's help to those who need it. May we continue to embrace this sacred and selfless and saintly call.

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