

Let These Bones Live
A Sermon for 1st Christian Church
4/10/11
Rev. Delle McCormick

Part I: The Word in the Gospel of John

****I do not claim to have the Truth, but I believe that each of us has a piece of the truth, and when we put these pieces together, we know a larger truth than each one of us holds. And so I share with you my truth this morning, which might change after we engage in conversation over this text. I hope my meditation on the words from the Gospel of John will be the beginning of a larger conversation that continues through the week and beyond.*

This morning I want to share two contemporary stories that parallel the raising of Lazarus story from the Gospel of John. But first, I want to say a word about the translation of the Greek word *Ioudaioi* (ee-u-day-oh), which is used 70 times in Gospel of John and only sixteen in the other three Gospels combined. According to Johannine Scholar, Wes Howard-Brooke, “*No Christian text has been a stronger basis for 2000 years of unjustified anti-Semitism than the Gospel of John.*” Most scholars agree that the word has a root meaning not of “Jews” but of “Judeans,” yet not a single major translation renders it “Judeans.”

The term Judeans in its original context did not refer exclusively to “Jews” until some forty or fifty years after the composition of the fourth gospel. Originally the term meant people from the tribe of Judah, but later took on the meaning of the elite of Judah. At the time of the writing of the Gospel of John, *Ioudaioi* conveyed both the geographical/ethnic-political sense as well as the more broad religious sense. *Judea* in Jesus’ time was not only the place in which some Jewish people lived but also the *symbolic and economic center* of Palestine.

Think of how “American” is used around the world. I found that in my work as a missionary in Mexico, “Americans” were blamed for almost everything. I would return home at night despairing both that to be an American was equated with being a card carrying member of the “empire” and that those of us who were working so hard to NOT be empire, were all lumped into one category. But over the years I heard time and time again, *Hermana, don’t take this personally. We don’t mean YOU. We mean Wall Street, the Pentagon – the head of the neoliberal “monster”.*

Having said that, the Gospel of John is either one of the most beloved or most reviled books of the New Testament. It was written approximately a century after Jesus death and after the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in 70CE. This was a devastating time for the people of Israel, God’s chosen people. Imagine if some foreign power came and wiped out Washington DC and all its national landmarks. For the people of Israel, the response was, much like what happened in the US after 9/11, a narrowing of the tradition’s symbols down to a collection of books. With the outward manifestation of God’s elect destroyed, all that remained was a life of quiet piety, grounded in the written presence of God and the wisdom of those who studied those words.

For the followers of Jesus, the shock was equally intense but for different reasons. By the middle part of the first century, the combination of oppression of Roman and Temple-state elite had pushed the submerged disgruntlement of the masses into the open. Just as in other crisis for the people of Israel when crisis provoked the creative imagination conjuring up different ways God would relieve them of their suffering, following the second destruction of the Temple, movements sprang up with various kinds of messiahs and prophets emerging to proclaim God’s favor and attract a following that would bring the people back into God’s favor.

At the same time, those gathered around the memory of Jesus found themselves increasingly pressed to solidify their identity in the face of forces threatening to splinter or destroy their unity. They were forced to build a wedge that would insert them more convincingly into the minds and hearts of those who were disgruntled with the Roman/Temple elite rule and so created story and language that forged a strong sense of “chosen-ness”, putting words in Jesus’ mouth that, according to Biblical scholars, he probably never said and claiming their Way as the ONLY way,

This is what either irritates or delights readers of the Gospel of John today. Those who chafe at the absoluteness and arrogance (and millennia of anti-Semitic interpretation) of the language and lean more toward Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s version of Jesus’ life and ministry – and those who wish to build a wall around God and claim God only for themselves.

I fall into the category of chafing, and I love this Gospel. I don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. A responsible reading of John calls us to denounce the ways in which it is used to incite and divide God’s people while at the same time loving and learning from the rich and compelling use of story. This morning, I would like to share with you two stories that I feel closely parallel the one we heard this morning from John’s Gospel.

Part II: The Word in the world: Severiano/Mayan altar

In my life-work in Chiapas, people often came to me with “lost causes.” On one such occasion, I received a knock on my door one weekend morning at 7am. Used to visits by community embers at all hours of the day and night, I opened the door to three young indigenous campesino farmers. The one in the middle hung limp and lifeless between the two on the outside. Could they come in? Sure, wondering what kind of a fix I was getting into this time.

It took a few minutes to understand that the life-less man was the brother on one who brought him. He had suddenly taken ill, refusing to eat, becoming increasingly depressed and uncommunicative. A month back, he attempted suicide by hitting himself over the head with a large branch. Since then he had been basically catatonic or comatose.

Could I help them?, they asked. Severiano was a beloved and valued member of their community, a leader of the Zapatista movement, and they were desperate to save him.

We took him to the hospital that treated indigenous and indigent people, where he was x-rayed and given a clean bill of health and a prescription for Paxil, an antidepressant that was completely out of reach of Severiano and his community. So back we went to my house with semiconscious, emaciated, near-dead Severiano draped between us.

I told his brother that we could take Severiano to a catholic convent, where a group of us trained in Reiki would work with him to see what we could do. (Keep in mind, these were people who had NO other recourse.) His brother agreed and off we went.

Meanwhile, another group of men came into town to train with me in healing and transforming trauma techniques. When they heard about Severiano, they told me that they were *curanderos*, ancient healers from the Mayan tradition. They would work with him at night using their techniques, and work with me to learn new techniques.

Now these men did not know Severiano, were not from the same community. In fact, they were some ten hours walking distance from his community, but they were all indigenous poor campesinos from the countryside. They were all members of the Zapatista movement for indigenous civil rights, but had never

met nor heard of Severiano.

One of the men was what is called a *pulsero*, which is a healer who, by taking the pulse of a patient can discern the root causes of his or her disease. he asked if he could take Severiano's pulse? I consulted with his brother and father, who had arrived by this time. *Yes* was the answer.

The man took his pulse and came to me privately saying, *Oh, hermana, what has happened is that Severiano killed his best friend. He drowned him in the river close to where they lives. They had quarreled over a woman. The river spirit has his soul and we must get it back.*

Ok, I said, a little dubiously, but I had come to have great respect for indigenous culture and customs. We talked to his father, who told us that yes, he had taken ill shortly after his friend drowned, but no one had expected him of such a thing. Severiano was a respected young leader in his community. He had taught himself to read and to play the violin. But yes, perhaps this was true.

We proceeded with many healing rituals that were strange to me, and a few that were strange for them. At one point, I was holding him with his back to my chest. He was in a catatonic state with this silent howl fixed on his face. I was sitting with him, holding him up with his back to me and my arms around him and hands on his heart, and it occurred to me to say, *Severiano, Mother God knows what you did and she forgives you.* he began to sob, melting the howl from his face, as I rocked him for a half hour or so.

The men would spoon broth into his mouth and play the guitar and sing to him, cradling his body with theirs. They also dunked him in cold water, tied herbs to his head, and shouted out his demons. I have never seen anything like it. And slowly, Severiano began to come back. Each time they whispered to him that he was forgiven and that he could go home again, he regained a little more life. And finally, a week later, he walked out of that convent on his own steam. We went back to the river where he asked for its forgiveness. he returned to his community, where he lived as the son of the parents of the man whose life he had taken. Restorative justice. In indigenous communities in Chiapas, it is the norm.

When it was all over, I asked the men why they had spent so much time on him. They hadn't known him and had walked a whole day just to get to where I was teaching a class. They got almost no sleep the week we worked together, between their classes with me and their work with Severiano.

Hermana, they said, *we can not afford to lose one member of our community.*

I hear Jesus calling *Lazarus, come out!* And the dead man walked out of his river tomb and back into life with his community.

Part III: The Word in Our Midst: Nancy, George and Eric King

The second story I would like to share is about two dear friends of mine, George and Nancy Mairs. Some of you might know the Mairs. They live close by and have been very active in Tucson around social and political struggles. George volunteers at Casa Maria Catholic Worker, among other things, and is often seen hanging out with homeless men and women. Nancy is the author of *Ordinary Time* and *A Dynamic God*, two books I would highly recommend if you haven't read them. Although Nancy is wheelchair bound due to her advancing MS, she can still be found protesting the war with the Women in Black out here on the street corner. They are fierce and loving in their witness to their faith. They will be chagrined to hear me call them saints, but each of them is in his and her own way, very human and very holy people.

Nancy and George had an adopted son who was brutally murdered in 2000, yet have both advocated strongly for the abolition for the death penalty, saying that the killing of killers does not bring freedom

from suffering to anybody. The death penalty legitimates and perpetrates violence.

I am new to the death penalty debate, but I know in my heart and soul that executions have always been wrong. While Janet Napolitano was governor of Arizona, we had no executions, but now that Jan Brewer is in office, they have begun again. At least one man, Eric King, has been executed within the past couple of weeks. I believe there are some 130 men and women on death row in Arizona, awaiting execution. The second was scheduled for last week and others will follow quickly.

Crucifixion did not end with Jesus. We continue to try and convict and kill people whose souls have been murdered long before they take the life of another. Some are innocent and there have been several stories on NPR and in the newspapers recently about such cases. Yet they die of hanging, electrocution or injection. In Arizona, we “put them to sleep” as we would an animal, by lethal injection.

For the past ten years, Nancy and George have befriended a man on Death Row. Little did they expect that coming to know and love Eric King would so touch and change their lives. The relationship between them is, I believe, an example how the Gospel of John is lived out in our midst.

I hear the words of Jesus echoing, *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep and we are going there to wake him* and cannot continue on with my life knowing of that we continue to participate in this type of punishment. I think of Severiano and his community’s commitment to heal and return him to his community – to practice forgiveness while also holding him accountable for what he did and for making restitution to those he harmed. *Hermana, we cannot afford to lose one member of our community.*

But this was not the case with Eric. Our penal system is completely unforgiving or interested in restorative justice. Despite itself, occasionally it is rehabilitating, as was the case for Eric, but this mainly due to the relationship that grew up between him and the Mairs.

Nancy and George visited Eric regularly over the last ten years, making the long drive to Florence, going through the hassle of being frisked and made to wait, of sitting behind a thick piece of glass as they talked to their friend, of not being able to touch him, ever, even as they prayed together.

Over the years, they saw great changes in Eric. While they all moved back and forth between despair and hope, they also found joy in small things. They came to love each other. They corresponded often and it was tragic to know that they were free while he was “entombed”. But their relationship was equally a source of comfort and delight for each of them.

When Eric had his final clemency hearing, Nancy and George were there as he was denied. he had served more than twenty years, and while the person with who he had allegedly committed the crime had gotten off after a few years, he would soon be put to death.

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Nancy,

What type of week has it been for you? Hopefully neither you or George been feeling stressed nor experiencing more pains just the normal, which comes with aging.

Well, I’m still holding my head up, believing that everything happens for a reason even though the final arrival is like one imagined. Otherwise you guys, things is okay. Know what I miss somewhat checking out books from the library. (Nancy I picture you smiling, saying that’s just like Eric, he would mention

library books now.) Days been flying by quick but guess what I saw my mom on Monday she told me she had spoken to you and George. That was thoughtful. Didn't know if that phone number would still be viable – I never know at times but that's just the way it is.

Let me touch upon the latest surrounding the elephant that's in this room (my soul and body) My legal team is mainly focused primarily on how best to present a good picture of me to the Clemency Body, either to say I'm innocent or it just isn't right that I had a co-defendant whose basically just went free. What will I say if I'm asked to speak? Can't express remorse since I've always denied any and all involvement in this crime. Will I get combative when the DA paint me as a crazed animal? Oh, well, right? You know I've been having legal visits and calls and I'm constantly being told by the legal team, "We are still trying to do what we can."

Monday I turned in my last meal request. Most condemned probably always write, steak, lobster, or caviar (fish eggs) "Smile" This is what I put down – fried catfish, collier greens, yums [yams and marshmelows], cornbread, a cream soda, chocolate cake, an grapefruit and tomato: What do you make of my choice?

Did Rachel contact you yet? After I spoke on the phone with you last, I wrote a short note letting her know she would be hearing from you guys – that I didn't have her number to give you, so since I had yours I gave it to Rachel. You three might as well show up together. I've not being watching hardly any news but I'm aware of the rising cost of gas. On "Good Morning America" the other day the camera went to some gas station by an airport in Orlando that's selling gas for \$5.39 gal. The scam is so many travelers return their rental cars must fill up the tank and being pressed for time is forced to pay whatever it is. (What a dirt bag?) And the behavior Charles Sheen was made into "breaking news". The media don't know the real meaning "Priority" but the combined actions of Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Lindsey Lohan over the three years of not stop coverage of their meltdown don't compare.

You won't guess whose all in this pod, its supposed to be only Dan Cook [the next man to be executed] and myself. For the first two weeks, Velasquez was upstairs on Feb 23rd he finally was told to pack up. He was gone for like five days, but was brought back on Monday 28th, last week. Then on that Wednesday Kayar, Sammy Lopez [future executions]. I didn't see the third guy came with em. He ain't said a word – all I know is for certain the C.O.s take 4 mega sacks and dinners up there. (Could I be imagining things out of stress?)

Two weeks ago a chaplain saw Dan to give him communion before he left Dan asked him just to speak to me. Since I'm respectful I did, two days later Dan asked me would I receive communion? Just replied, "Yeah, I would." So last Monday, the 28th I were in the wet cell just completing a legal call, the chaplain came up and tell me my friend Dan was offering is communion to me – cause the chaplain only had trappings for one person. Did I want it? I said, yeah, so he pulls out a napkin with the smallest piece of cracker I've ever seen. Size "☐ No Kidding, and took out a cap that you could find on a baby's dose of cough syrup. [draws small cap] I repeated some words after him, he then said a prayer for me. Dan did a nice thing believing me accepting communion will give peace to my soul. Remember I was mentioning the Catholic study from overseas called "Bible Alive." Here is an article from a issue (article included). Pray for me some more. I'm feeling laconic of late. You guys keep good positive thoughts. Engage in conversation of relevants with friends. Advocate for the voiceless.

Love you both,
Eric [King]

Part IV: The Word in/through our live

Jesus calls for Lazarus to *Come out!* Jesus confronts Lazarus and us with the urgent call to come back to life, and to practice resurrection with those in our society whom the dominant culture deems socially, spiritually, physically, and emotionally dead - beyond redemption, resuscitation or reunification. Jesus calls us to the tombs of people and communities who are bound by the grave clothes of war, genocide, poverty, disease, despair, systematic abuse, systemic oppression and/or abuse.

To Lazarus' community (us) Jesus says, *Unbind him and let him go.* Resurrected men, women, and children require caring communities that are willing to wait and walk with them until they are able to return as functioning members of society. We are called to remove the grave clothes of self-hatred and doubt, social isolation, marginalization, and oppression; to unwind the wrappings of fear, anxiety, loss and grief so that they might again walk and act in dignity and become creative members of society.

According to Wes Howard-Brooke, the triple binding of Lazarus' feet, hands and face dramatically underscores the inability of the dead one to free himself without help, even after being called forth by Jesus. Thus Jesus' command, *Unbind him and let him go* shows that the life he has been given is not fully restored *unless* members of his community untie the bonds that they have helped to create.

This is not simply a story of resurrection after a "normal death," this is a story of resurrection imbedded in the larger story of crucifixion (injustice and violence) and rising again despite it.

Perhaps individuals can "raise the dead", but it takes whole faith communities to transcend the cross and bring life from the horrific, brutal, overwhelming, unjust reality of the cross.

I close with prayer from International Women's Conference in Beijing:

Imagine:

A clean sky

Active peace

A woman's voice

singing somewhere

The army disbanded

The harvest abundant

The wounded healed

the child wanted

the prisoner freed

the body's integrity honored

The lover returned

Labor, equal, fair and valued

No hand raised in any gesture but greeting

secure interiors of heart, home, lands

so firm as to make secure borders irrelevant

at last.

Amen