

**Justice Is Rooted In Relationships**

John 11:1-7, 11-14, 17-27, 34-44

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This is the third week of our five-week series about justice — The Stories Justice Needs to Tell. The first week, the Canaanite woman taught us that sometimes, for justice to be realized, you really do have to raise your voice, shouting until something changes. Last week, Jeremiah's exhortation to the exiles to seek the welfare of their city reminded us that seeking justice means caring about the places we live and everyone else who happens to live there, too. This week, we turn to the story of Lazarus, the raising of Lazarus, to explore how justice is rooted in relationships.

Jesus seems to have a different relationship with Lazarus than he has with anyone else. First, John is careful to point out that this story is about "a certain man," not just any man. Most of the people Jesus encounters are never named for us. But this is Lazarus, identified by name, location, and relation. Lazarus of Bethany, brother of Mary, the one who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. Mary and Martha share the news of his illness with Jesus by saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." The one whom you love. In deciding to return to Judea, Jesus explains to his disciples, it's about "our friend, Lazarus." All throughout his ministry, Jesus talks about love and friendship at great length, but in no other instance is any specific person identified as the object of his love and friendship. Of course other people were — lots of other people were — but I think the gospels are careful to emphasize the magnitude of this relationship because of the magnitude of the miracle that eventually follows.

Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer and activist who founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a

human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. He has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned. In his book *Just Mercy*, he reveals something he learned early in life that shaped the person he has become and the work he has pursued. He tells the story of his grandmother, who was the daughter of people who were enslaved in Virginia. Her father talked to her all the time about growing up in slavery, and that legacy influenced her and the way she raised her own children and grandchildren. She developed a habit of constantly telling Bryan and the others to "keep close."

He writes, "When I visited her, she would hug me so tightly I could barely breathe. After a little while, she would ask me, 'Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?' If I said yes, she'd let me be. If I said no, she would [come at me] again. I said no a lot because it made me happy to be wrapped in her formidable arms. She never tired of pulling me to her. 'You can't understand most of the important things from a distance,' she would often say. 'Remember that, Bryan. You have to get close.'"

I remember a time with my own grandmother when I was little. My brother and I were playing in her backyard. I tripped over a tree root, and sprawled out over the driveway, scraping my knees and elbows and arms but good. I started to cry, which brought my grandmother running out of the house. "Where does it hurt?" she asked me. As soon as she reached me, that was her question. "Where does it hurt?" Justice is all about relationships. Because justice can only be achieved when we get close enough to one another to see where it hurts, to see what is broken, to see what

needs mending, righting, and restoring.

Back when I was serving my first church, our Presbyterian denomination hadn't yet changed its polity to allow people in same-gendered relationships to be ordained. Thankfully, those days are behind us, but at the time we were still living with the old standards. A member of the church, Elizabeth, was attending seminary and wished to be approved by the Session to enter the ordination process. Elizabeth was involved in nearly every aspect of church life, from worship to mission to serving as a deacon. Elizabeth was also in a committed relationship with another woman.

I worried day and night about how to present this to our Session. I was leaning toward addressing it strictly from a theological point of view, starting the conversation without mentioning Elizabeth at all, so that if Session decided no, it might feel slightly less personal to her. Of course, as I say that out loud, it sounds absolutely ridiculous, but I was, shall we say, a little rough around the edges those first years. Luckily, my colleague Larry stepped in and intervened. "I don't want to make it about Elizabeth," I said to him. "I don't want to make it personal." "Jenny," he said, "you absolutely want to make it personal. Because Session may not know what they think about ordination standards or taking a stand against an antiquated and unjust policy. But they do know what they think about Elizabeth. They know she has a long and beautiful relationship with this church. They know that they love her, and that she loves them. They might say no to a hypothetical, abstract idea. But they won't say no to someone they know and love. Because they know her like they do, they will agree she is called to ministry."

He was right, of course. The Session voted to endorse Elizabeth, and less than a year later, the denomination voted to change the policy, in large part because no longer could they ignore the ministry of those who identified as LGBTQ, faithful folks who loved

Jesus so much they refused to leave his church behind.

I learned in a very real way that it will always be easier to maintain the status quo when it's kept at arm length. Justice becomes possible when we get close enough to one another. Justice is rooted in relationships.

Jesus and Lazarus are so close. They are so close, Jesus weeps over his friend's death. Only twice in his ministry does Jesus find himself in tears, and this is one of them. So he goes to the tomb and cries, "Come out!" And then, the gospel tells us, "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

It is the final miracle of Jesus' life, and it is unparalleled. Water into wine is refreshing and feeding 5000 with a few scraps is appetizing and restoring a man's sight is revealing, but raising someone to new life? That's not just death-defying, it's death-defeating. It's so astonishing and attention-grabbing that for a long time, I missed something important.

Jesus says, "Come out!" and Lazarus walks out of the tomb. But when he walks out, he is still described as a dead man. "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound..." Jesus gets him on his feet again, but that is only part of the miracle. He then invites the community around him into the work of restoring life. Because Lazarus is still wrapped in the trappings of death, his burial clothes still clinging to him. You might remember that when Jesus himself is raised, every gospel takes care to point out that his burial clothes were left behind inside the tomb. Because a man fully alive doesn't need them.

Now, make no mistake, with Lazarus, Jesus could have done the same. Instead, he does something perhaps even more miraculous. He makes it possible — necessary even — for others to take part in bringing the miracle to completion. "Unbind him," he says

to everyone around. "Unbind him and let him go. You need to finish what I've started. You are a part of this, too. So get about the business of loosening those bandages. Shake the spiderwebs of death off of him and set him free. That work is for you to do."

From start to finish, everything that happens in this story happens because of relationships. The relationships Jesus has with those around him, and, thanks to Jesus' miraculous reminder, the relationships those around him have with one another. That's what happens when you follow Jesus long enough and far enough. You end up discovering you are connected to everyone he's connected to. You end up being asked to love everyone he loves and serve everyone he serves and seek justice everywhere he does.

That is always a reciprocal practice, though, whether we realize it at the time or not. Because while those of us who have much might help unbind folks who have to make a choice between feeding their family and paying the rent — when we do that, we are being unbound from the danger of an insular existence. And when we help unbind someone lost in the caretaking of dementia, we are being unbound from the risk of meaningless days. When we help unbind someone from looming threat of medical debt, we are being unbound from the captivity that can spring from excessive materialism. Justice unbound is always a reciprocal practice.

This whole story is traditionally referred to as the raising of Lazarus. It's a good story, but it's a long story. It's a long story even as we read it, and I abbreviated it a bit. Start to finish, it's 44 verses. And did you catch when Lazarus is actually raised? In verse 43. Verse 43 of 44. But if we skip the entire middle, it's too easy to read this as a story about death, when really, nothing could be further from the truth. For this is a story about life. A story about faith. A story about our capacity to believe in situations that defy belief under any reasonable circumstance.

Biblical scholar Brian Blount says, "The story is not so much about Lazarus being raised from the dead as it is about us being raised from our fear and hesitation. When Jesus says, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he isn't talking about rising up the dead; he's talking about waking up the living."

Do you remember what Jesus says to Martha right before he calls Lazarus out of the tomb? She tries to warn Jesus that his friend has been in the tomb four days, and in the words of the King James Version of this story, the dead man, "he shall stinketh." Jesus' only response is to say, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?"

And of course, Martha has already said she believes, sort of. Earlier in the story she has dutifully told Jesus, yes, of course, she believes her brother will rise again on the last day. Eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. "Yes, Martha," he says, "it's true for the future and I am the resurrection and the life here and now. My promises are not far off and long away. For anyone who dares believe in who I am and what that means, those promises are in front you this very day." Which is to say that justice is not something left for the afterlife, when the angels and saints and Jesus himself will sort everything out. Justice is needed and justice is possible, here, today, for those who are faithful enough, or maybe foolish enough, to believe in everything that seems impossible.

And why wouldn't we? We've just seen a dead man walk.