

Lazarus has been dead for four days; he is stinky dead. When I was a kid on the farm, we had ten thousand chickens. We actually had an incinerator to take care of the dead ones. I have vivid memories of what four days dead, smells like...

There is dead, and then there's stinky dead... That is so far dead; you might not even want to come back to life... I mean, bad Hair is one thing, but rotting and flies? Uffda! That's on a whole different level...

And this is exactly where we encounter Lazarus this morning. The contrast between death and life couldn't be further apart. And in raising Lazarus from the dead, from being stinky dead, Jesus demonstrates authority over sin and death.

The one phrase that catches my attention, this morning, is Jesus saying, "Unbind him, and let him go." I'd like to do some reflecting with this idea of unbinding, and specifically in connection with death.

In our biblical tradition, sin and death are connected. Sin is fundamentally hurting one another; Sin is violence against one another. And death is the consequence of that hurting, violence--sinning. And truth is, we are in bondage to this stuff, we are in bondage to sin and death.

One way that we experience this unbinding, is through the forgiveness of sin. As Luther says in the small catechism, "where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation." In other words, where there is forgiveness there is literally a resurrection from being dead in sin...

In our Lenten journey we have been focusing on forgiveness. And I've been very moved by the reflections of the other pastors in our round robin. I love to hear how other people think about forgiveness and experience it.

One of the things that I've become aware of, on my own Lenten journey is that forgiveness is really two dimensional. Vertical and horizontal-- forgiveness between us and God, and exactly because of that forgiveness from God, we can also experience forgiveness between each other.

Quick story... I remember a bible study many years ago in Austin. One of the things I love about bible studies, is the conversations. And often in bible studies, participants become close and trusted friends.

That day we were talking about forgiveness. And a friend of mine, admitted to the whole group he had seriously hurt another individual. The comment was a little out of the blue. He didn't say who or how... He just dropped it into the conversation. Then he quickly consoled himself by saying that God had forgiven him.

Now, remember, this was in the context of a group. So, I asked him cautiously, "Is it possible to ask **the person you hurt**, to forgive you?"

My friend had all sorts of reasons why he didn't need to ask for forgiveness. It was partly the other person's fault... He barely did anything wrong... It was a long time ago... Lots and lots of excuses... Well, he could deny that it bothered him, but the way it came up, I had a feeling it did...

Well, about six months after that bible study, my friend came to my office. He closed the door and started talking about his son. He hadn't seen him in many years. But recently, they had begun to talk again. And it was all because he was able to reach out and do a little confessing.

There was a little thaw, an unbinding... And through tears, he said they were getting together over the weekend. As Luther would say, where there is forgiveness there is life...

Another story... Perhaps more cultural than personal... I'm often amazed by how poetry can inspire me. I think poets are some of the wisest people I know.

One of my favorite poets, guitar picker Brad Paisley, wrote a song entitled *Accidental Racist*, it's on his Wheelhouse album. Many people hated the song—I think it hit a nerve. But I loved it. He was wrestling with what it meant for him to be a privileged white boy from the south, who was trying to understand what it's like not to be.

He wrestles with being proud of his southern heritage and at the same time being conscious of the evil perpetrated by slavery. He wrestles with his relationship with people of color.

The song also features LL Cool Jay, a black rapper who describes what life is like when you're living in the hood, "Now my chains are gold but I'm still misunderstood." The song acknowledges that the "Mason Dixon needs some fixin." They spend quite a bit of time in the song, just singing past one another, and eventually the song ends with both of them committed to "buy em a beer, conversate and clear the air."

The thing about this song, for me, is that's it's about two people working hard at understanding and reconciliation. It's authentic, they are telling their truth, wrestling with questions of history, oppression, identity, culture, culpability, and yet for everything that divides them, they still find their common humanity.

For me it's a song about the hard work of building bridges, and hope. There's something going on in that song that deeply resonates with me... And this isn't easy stuff...

Music, art, poetry, dreams, all that stuff thrives on the intersection of pulling sub-conscious truth into the open, into our consciousness. All this functions to unbind us from death...

Frankly, I think that's why music is so important in our culture and also in our worship. It speaks to our souls. Somebody once said that singing is like praying twice. Music is able to say things we are not consciously able to say. Music pulls those sub-conscious truths into consciousness.

I heard an explanation of sin the other day that I'm still reflecting on, I'm still not sure what I think of it. Essentially, it said that sin is acting in an unconsciousness way. Remember Jesus saying, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do?" There is sin, and then there is this stinky sin, the stuff we participate in that we're barely aware of...

I think that pretty much characterizes me. I'm particularly blind to all my jealousies, all my self-righteousness, my judgmental finger pointing stuff... It's so easy for me to see this stuff in others, but for some reason it's hard for me to see it in myself. And frankly, that's a deeper kind of bondage than many of us might be comfortable admitting. And for myself, I know it's true.

Jesus is well aware of our capacity to sin, consciously and unconsciously. And I wonder, do you suppose this unbinding is also a way for us to increase our awareness, to bring into consciousness the depth our sin? To take this stinky sin, the stuff we're barely able to see, and show it to us, so we can confess and be healed?

The good news today is that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And Jesus is unbinding us from sin and death. And just as he raised Lazarus from a stinky death; he raises our faith, our hope and dreams, and our love.

God doesn't love us if we're good; God loves us because God is good. God is always showering us with love and mercy, always opening our eyes in deeper and deeper ways. Transforming our hearts, so that we in turn reach out, to love our neighbors... It's all God's work. It changes us... And truthfully, I believe it, because I've seen it...

Amen