

Homily: "Lord, Make Me a Blessing to Others Today"

The Rev. Gary Coffey, Grace Episcopal Church, Asheville, 4/6/14

Jesus once said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man," (meaning He, Jesus), "has nowhere to lay His head." What Jesus meant by this was that He had no home to return to after His travels. In that sense, our Lord was homeless. However, Jesus did have three dear friends that He visited as often as He could. Their home may well have been the closest thing that Jesus had to a home. Their names, we know, were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and they were sisters and their brother who lived in Bethany which is about 3 miles outside of Jerusalem.

One could make the case that, outside of the circle of His twelve disciples, these three were His closest friends. We are told that each of us as Jesus' followers has a measure of God's Holy Spirit, but that Jesus has the Spirit without measure. Because of this, Jesus knew things, things were sometimes revealed to Jesus by the Spirit before they happened.

An example of this foreknowledge is seen earlier in the chapter from which our Gospel was taken. Jesus was in another city and heard from a messenger that His dear friend Lazarus was ill. Rather than rush to see about Lazarus, Jesus stayed two days longer where he was before He made His way to Bethany. The text tells us that Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to die and that He was going to raise him from the dead. Later on, after Jesus received the report of Lazarus' death, He told His disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep and that He was going to awaken him.

Jesus' disciples were fearful about going anywhere near Jerusalem again. They told Jesus that recently when Jesus was there, the Jews tried to stone Him and they thought it best for Jesus to stay away from there. Not understanding what Jesus had meant they said, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." But, Jesus was undeterred by their pleas and they set out for Bethany to "awaken Lazarus".

I would like for us to look together this morning at Martha's faith in Jesus.

When Martha and Mary saw Jesus, they both said the same thing to Him which was, "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." But Martha, amazingly added, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Isn't Martha saying that she believes that Jesus can bring Lazarus back to life?

Jesus responded to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said, "I know that He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Many, perhaps most of the Jews, at the time of Jesus believed in the resurrection of the dead. We know that the Pharisees believed and taught the resurrection of God's people beyond death. So, here Martha is just witnessing to what faithful Jews in the first century believed about resurrection at the end of time.

But then Jesus responded with something that is important for you and me to get our hearts around this morning. He said,

"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. Do you believe this?"

Throughout the Gospel according to John, Jesus is revealing who He is and why He came into the world. We have heard His witness about Himself in the readings that we have had from the Gospel of John in the last few weeks. Jesus told Nicodemus, the Pharisee, that God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son that all who believe in Him should not perish but receive eternal life. Jesus went on to say that the Father did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

The following week, after telling the Samaritan woman many of the intimate details of her life, Jesus told her that He was in fact the Messiah.

Last week, before Jesus healed the man blind from birth, He told the man that He, Jesus, is the light of the world. After Jesus healed the man, He said to the man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man? You have seen Him and the one who is speaking with you is he." Remember that the Son of Man was a Messianic figure prophesied by Daniel in the Old Testament.

Then, in today's Gospel, Jesus lays it out even clearer as He says, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Through all of these passages, in all of these various scenarios, Jesus is reassuring His hearers and us today that really death for us is nonexistent. Yes, we will pass through death one day, but according to Jesus, for us who choose to put our trust in Him, death is just a portal to life with Him, life with God forever.

Jesus is saying over and over again, particularly in this Gospel, that He is in fact the Savior of the world. He is saying that God came to earth, incarnate or enfleshed in the body of Jesus of Nazareth to live with us and to die for us and take us to be with Him forever.

And so make no mistake about it. The truth about life after death, according to Jesus, is that there IS life after death and that it is available to all who want it. Life after death is available through Jesus Christ. It is inclusive, not exclusive where human beings are concerned. The Scripture says that it is not God's will that ANY should perish but that ALL, ALL should come to repentance and trust in God.

Passages such as this one I just cited that say that it is God's will that ALL should come to repentance have led folks like Rob Bell to believe that God's will will be done, that God will accomplish what God set out to accomplish and that ALL will in fact be saved, that all will be redeemed by this Christ.

I hope Bell is right, that eventually God will get what God wants and that ALL will come to repentance. I think he might be right and I'll tell you why. For several years, now, I have been thinking about how God, when God looks upon us, sees everything about us, who we are, why we are who we are, how we have been affected through both nature and nurture or lack thereof. Think about Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well.

If we gave it some thought, we could go back and create an unholy and terrible scenario regarding the upbringing of a human being. Let's say that a certain human being was brought up in horrendous circumstances of abuse and neglect as a child. That person is now an adult and has pretty much played out the hand that he was dealt as a child. Since human beings often mistakenly equate their parents with their idea of God, then in this case you can imagine what God may be like in this person's mind. And since his idea of God is so skewed, so warped, so damaged, he doesn't want anything to do with God if that is what God is like. Who can blame him, right?

So, he lives out his life, rejecting any thought of God, doing the best he can with what he has. But, like the rest of us, he reaches the end of his life. He leaves this world. Suddenly, he is confronted with the reality of the real God, the loving One who who loved him and gave Himself for him. God is more wonderful than anything he could have ever imagined, given his background and his subsequent life. When this person sees God as God is, will he not gladly and freely fall into God's loving embrace? I believe that he will. I believe that everyone would and that perhaps everyone actually will, when faced with the living God.

The only difference between him and us, Beloved, is that he had to live his whole life on this earth without knowing God's loving presence now. Despite any horrendous circumstances in our backgrounds, somehow we have the wonderful advantage of knowing Jesus, of being loved by Him, and of trying to follow Jesus each day of our lives.

Remember how part of Jesus' mission was to heal the brokenhearted. Remember how He cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene and she became one of His closest and most beloved disciples. As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that through Him, broken people are made whole. He has healed and is continuing to heal our brokenness, mine and yours. Through our love, or through His love in us, He can heal the brokenness of others. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you or I could be used to bring the love of Jesus to someone in this world who is going through this life broken, without hope, and without any knowledge of the God of love? And why not? For we were blessed to be a blessing.

Beloved, it is possible for us to be that blessing God intended us to be. We need only to pray every day that God would make us a blessing to others. I am pretty sure that God always answers that prayer with an emphatic YES! God says,

"Yes, my child, you've got it! I will make you a blessing to others today, for that is my perfect will for you. I have blessed you that you may be a blessing. Go forth this day and be the blessing to others that I created you to be!"

Remember the prayer and let's covenant together to pray it every day as we awaken. The prayer is one simple sentence. There is a yellow laminated copy in your bulletin, and extra ones, one for each family member, at the back of the church. Let's place these at our bedsides as a reminder to pray this prayer each and every day. In fact, just for fun, let's pray it together right now. Everyone, grab your copies. Ready?

**"Lord, please make me a blessing to others today, in Jesus' Name Amen."** And God will say, "Will do." Amen.