

REFLECTION
October 31, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY
John 11:32

You may have noticed that for the past month we have been singing the same hymn during Communion—*Spirit, Be Our Spirit*, a hymn written by the Benedictine Monks of Weston Priory.

Spirit, be our spirit, in this time of searching for new life.
Open inner spaces with the fullness of your love.

Open inner spaces with the fullness of your love. It's important that we acknowledge and open ourselves to God for help with the transitions we are in—of returning to the Chapel for worship after two years and of preparing for a new chapter in leadership. Today's Gospel lesson provides just such an opportunity to move in this direction. We'll come back to this.

The next first step.

Jesus arrives at the home of his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The two sisters are weeping over the death of their brother. Jesus is deeply moved. He asks them, "Where have you laid him?" In this moment, here and now, be still—look around.

There's Mary, sweet little sister Mary, collapsed with grief, clinging to Jesus' feet. Her sobs are interrupted only by her regret—"Where were you? If you had only been here..." There's Martha, standing back, eyes swollen with so much crying—exhausted from four days of waiting and wondering if she could have done something different, as if her brother's death were her fault. She pushes back more tears. Tries to be strong for those around her. "Its over. Nothing can be done. It's too late." Neighbors are there. They are crying too. They weep not only for Lazarus and his family, but most of all, they weep for themselves. Their wailing forms a sort of sound track that sweeps over everyone, the whole scene with a relentless hopelessness. "This is our fate. Life is unfair. We're all going to die." Jesus weeps also. His weeping sounds different. And when they hear him, they are silent. "Look how deeply he loves them." Then, when Jesus stands at the tomb, he says "Lazarus, come out!"

There is another perspective in this story—it is the perspective of Lazarus. Seems to me, that the real miracle in the Gospel story is not so much that Jesus called him forth from the tomb, but that Lazarus took that next first step. What must it take to have the courage to venture out of death into life? It's a miracle that Lazarus didn't say, "Look, I'm done. I don't want to try any further. It's no use. No matter what I do or say, it's always the same. I've had enough. Leave me alone. I prefer this death and the comfort of this darkness."

This may be the most important story in John's Gospel. This is the seventh and most remarkable sign of John's Gospel—giving the Church, the followers of Jesus a generation after his death, an understanding about their own experience as a resurrection community. The miracle in this Gospel is that Lazarus not only heard Jesus' call, but took that next first step. The next first step is the hardest.

There is a rabbinic story about love that goes like this:

A student said to a rabbi, "Why does scripture say that the love of God is written on your heart and not in your heart?"
And the Rabbi answered, "This is because your heart must be broken for the love to fall in."

I used to believe that love is a decision we can make. But now I know that love is not a decision, it is a gift that we are given. It is not something we can make happen—it is something that happens to us when our hearts are ready to receive it.

Look at the story again. The Raising of Lazarus is a testament to the life-giving power of God's love, God's compassion for us that not only has the power to create but also to re-create. This story a testament to the life-giving power of God—to raise up a Church, a people, to accomplish the mission of re-creation. It is about God's love and our response. Jesus wept and Lazarus responded.

This congregation knows plenty about death and also plenty about resurrection. At its inception, the community came together—passionate, compassionate about offering a home away from home for soldiers and their families headed to the trenches in WWI. Imagine the tears and the prayers that were offered here. The doors have remained open all these years as a place a safe place where new life can be nurtured and sustained.

This congregation knows plenty about death and also plenty about resurrection. In the past year we have suffered the loss of over a dozen people who were members and were family. As we return after almost two years of pandemic, there are those of us who are no longer with us. The pain and the loss has touched each of us. We know what it is like to be broken-hearted.

But God's love is always about calling people to "come out"—to be stirred up — to be raised up—in response to God's compassion for each of us and the world. We are called as a broken-hearted Church—a church that listens and knows the tears and joys of all who enter here. We are called to overcome the deaths and injustices that haunt us and the tombs that hold us.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused more than 730,000 deaths in the United States. It is estimated at least 6.9 Million people died globally. 6.9 Million people is the size of tomb we have all been in—the extent of the darkness and sorrow we have endured. Businesses shuttered. Schools closed. Hospitals serving with sheer determination. Families unable to be together. Gatherings postponed. Broken hearts. Broken lives. On the nightly news from Manhattan we saw makeshift hospitals in the streets. Morgue trucks lined up. This is what the tomb looks like. Then, this past May there was a cover of the New Yorker magazine, now displayed in a prominent place on my bookshelf because it is the long awaited harbinger of change. It's an iconic image—the next first step—stepping out of the tomb in a way that speaks of restoration. It shows four people, a family, standing in a dark room. The door is cracked open—letting in a stream of light. Hand in hand, they look out into the bright light—which (after all, this is the New Yorker magazine)— is the skyline of New York City. Yes! "Lazarus, come out!" The world is opening again, though slowly.

My son was in a show this past Thursday night at a venue in the East Village—so with proof of vaccines and masks, we took the "next first step." We ventured out and then, we took the next second step and the next third step. To a show at the Public Theater. To an art museum in the Battery. To a restaurant, albeit, outdoors under a heat lamp. I felt like a bellwether! Do you know what a bellwether is? The church is a bell-wether. Lazarus is a bellwether. A bellwether is the leading sheep in a flock, with a bell around its neck so that the shepherd can know the movements of the flock by hearing the bell even when the flock is not in sight. Lazarus is a bellwether for the rest of us. With Gospel credentials

and IDs...Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are a family of bellwethers—standing before us today as saints—much needed saints. Urging us to take the next first step. Their lives bear witness to our own experience of sorrow and loss. Their lives also bear witness to Christ—then and now and forever—whose love calls them and us to a new chapter, into the light of a new day. We are a people with hearts broken, but where love has entered in and compassion now shapes our perspective and future.

This is what saints do. They help us see the glory of God and the light of a new day. It's time to take the next first step. The saints are with us—every step along the Way.

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Open inner spaces with the fullness of your love*

AMEN.