

“The Love of Jesus”

John 11:17-27, 38-53

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Love is one of those difficult things that perplexes and comforts all at the same time. To love someone is to know them so intimately that you can finish each other’s sentences, know the things that will bother one another, and to trust each other without fail. Whether that love is directed toward a family member, a spouse, or a dear friend, it is something that you all seek to share with someone. Why do you seek to love those around you? Well, as those who are in the faith of Christ, you love in response to His love for you. And yet, His love is incomprehensible—unknown in its totality—save for what has been revealed to us in Holy Scripture. That is what we get this morning in our Gospel Lesson. The love of Jesus is revealed in the words captured by the Apostle John, as the Lord raises His dear friend and brother from the bonds of death.

Lazarus had fallen ill and that illness led to his death. Lazarus, though much beloved by the Lord, Jesus Christ, was a sinner like every other and subject to the ailments of this sinful world, and ultimately to the final reality of sin—death. There is no escaping it while you bear the sinful flesh. Sin will continue to plague you and your conscience until the day you pass from this world and reach the glory of heaven. And that is the battle that all must face. Some persevere, and others succumb, but the Christian life is all about that fight. Sin is your enemy, and it is perpetrated and fueled by the evil one as he seeks to rip you away from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In Luther’s Small Catechism, on the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, he identifies our spiritual enemies as the world, the devil, and our sinful flesh. And that is about as accurate as that can get. The devil at every turn seeks to tempt you and corrupt your faith. He knows that you have been called out of the world and called to a new life in the waters of your baptism, and he uses his allies (the world and your sinful flesh) to upend that new life and drag you back down to death. Our Epistle lesson this morning says that “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on things of the flesh...[and] to set the mind on the flesh is death.” You live in a world that is bent on the destruction of your faith by any means necessary. There is no way for you to stop that. All you can do is endure it, but in order to persevere in the face of such attacks, you need Jesus and the love He brings you by His blood.

You are called by the new life of the Spirit to despise the world, not love it. 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the

love of the Father is not in him.” And that is exactly what the devil and your sinful flesh want. They want you to desire the things of this world more than the things of the Spirit. They want you to love them and feed their desires and abandon the love that God has for you for the sake of His Son. When Lazarus died, Jesus wept along with the rest of those who loved him, but not in the same way they were. Everyone in Bethany was giving into the despair of death, just as the evil one wanted. His fiery darts were piercing them to the core, including Lazarus’ sister, Mary. The devil believed he had won some great victory by the death of Jesus’ friend, and that sin was overcoming even the Son of God.

Because Jesus knew about the illness of Lazarus ahead of time and He did nothing about it. He knew he would die, and yet he allowed it to happen. When the Lord is told about Lazarus’ illness, he responds in 11:4, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” One might think that Jesus in His foreknowledge was simply saying, “It’s not a big deal. He’ll be fine, no need to worry.” But He knew very well that Lazarus would die, so He delayed two days before going to his friend in order to fulfill the will of the Father. It’s confusing to the sinful flesh to try and understand why the Lord’s will does what it does. Martha shows that in our text when she says, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” And there can be no question here of whether or not Lazarus was indeed dead. He had been in his tomb for four days, and opening it would almost certainly lead to a grotesque and stomach-churning stench coming out. He was not mostly-dead, but all-dead.

There was seemingly no hope for him. But Lazarus didn’t die in hopelessness. He died in the faith. He had faith in Jesus as the Messiah, knowing that he departed this world to dwell in the presence of the Almighty God. Yet it was not the Father’s will that he should depart for good. There was work yet to be done by His Son and Lazarus was a part of it. His death was not in vain, but that the Son of Man would be glorified in it. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and as the life, He alone can call back from the dead. As the resurrection, it is in and through Him that all will be raised from the dead. And just as the Father will raise His Son from the grave, here Jesus calls forth to Lazarus that he would “come out.” At the sound of His Savior’s voice, Lazarus came out, covered in the linen burial strips from head to toe.

He came out still covered in the burial strips as a symbol of the sin which still covers his body. This is not a final resurrection for Lazarus. He will still be subject to death at another time, and it is because of the sin which he bears, just the same as you. But that is not the end of that imagery used by the Lord. When Lazarus appears, Jesus tells the people to “unbind him, and let him go.” The strips of cloth are removed and he

is revealed from beneath the cloak of death as Christ's friend and brother. In this act of removing the strips of linen Jesus is giving baptismal realities. In the water of baptism, you are washed clean of the sin which would keep you bound in death. Those blessed waters are a resurrection to new life as you are baptized into the death of Jesus, and thus also into His resurrection. The resurrection of your spirit happens at that font, and gives you the hope of faith which you need to look forward to the final resurrection of the body.

Lazarus did not come out of the tomb with a perfected body, but the same sinful flesh with which he entered it. He still needs baptismal grace. He still needs the forgiveness of sins that is offered to all for the sake of Christ. Even though you have been raised to new life in Christ by the gift of Holy Baptism, you still need the continual grace of your Lord, Jesus Christ. You continually need the forgiveness of sins which Jesus has promised to give. Your baptism points you to the love He has for you, that though you are not perfect, He loves you enough to take away your guilt and shame. He loves you enough that He took those sins to the cross and bore them to His own death so that you won't have to face the possibility of eternal death.

Death is still a reality that all must face as you walk this world of sin. The sinful flesh that you carry must die in order to be raised up in the original righteous state for which it was meant. Death is a dreadful and fearful thing. Martha and Mary were beset with grief over the death of their brother, and even our Lord was aggrieved at his passing, much like when he heard of the death of his cousin John. But we do not grieve or look forward to death as others do who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Lazarus' resurrection was a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus when He will burst forth from the tomb on the third day. And Jesus' resurrection is the assurance—concrete certainty—that you too will rise again. The Lord will come on clouds descending to awaken the dead with a word when He tells all the world to “come out.” On that day you will be reunited, soul and perfected body and all because of the love of Jesus. He calls forth into the tombs out of love for those who are His brothers, fellow sons of the Most High God.

And while we wait for that glorious day, we celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in His Kingdom which shall have no end, in the foretaste of that feast to come. We partake of the body and blood of our Lord, who loved us to the point of death, even death on a cross. There is no mystery to be had as those who are in the faith. There are mysterious things we can't explain at times, but the love of Jesus is yours, and you don't have to wonder about it. You can see it. You can touch and taste it. You feel it as water is poured over the head in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is real forgiveness in these Holy Sacraments, real grace and love given to you through simple means for the benefit of your everlasting salvation. The source of forgiveness, life, and

salvation is the cross, flowing forth from Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. He has made it so that we need not fear sin, death, and the devil, because He has defeated them upon that bloody tree for you.

The love of Jesus is shown to you “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” as Paul says in Romans 5:8. There is no having to seek out His love. It emanates from His cross. It emanates from His blood shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. Lazarus was raised from the dead so that the glory of the only-begotten Son of God might shine forth in the world to show that His mercy knows no bounds. It cannot be curtailed, even by death, for He will go to Calvary to render it impotent and worthless upon the cross. By death He has destroyed death, and as those who have been baptized into that death, His victory over it is your victory as well. Because of His great love, He spoke to Lazarus and said, “Come out.” On the last day, when the Son of Man returns on the clouds of heaven, He will proclaim the same to all those whose bodies lie in the grave. As those who believe by the gift of the Holy Spirit, you will rise perfected in the light of His glory, forever glorified side-by-side with the saints and angels in the presence and love of Your Heavenly Father. Amen.