

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year B**  
**Date: 11/1/15**  
**Season: All Saints' Sunday**  
**John 11:17-44**

“But, Lord, he stinketh.”

If I had been reading – or in this case, singing – from the King James Bible a moment ago that’s what we would have heard instead of “Lord, here is already a stench because he has been dead four days.” I find that I prefer the King James version. It’s jolting. It’s startling. It’s earthy. It’s real. Just like death.

We are all Lazarus, you know. We are all headed towards death. It’s a fact. Yet, so much of what we do in life is built around avoiding the fact of death. Our over-consumption of stuff, our worship of the material, our medication of the pain of life through alcohol, drugs, food, sex—you name your particular method of escape—it’s all a means of avoiding the reality of death. Yet, we are all Lazarus. All that frenzied activity carries with it, shall we say, a particular aroma. We are all a little rank. In fact, we stinketh.

And that’s where Jesus comes in. Let’s step back for a minute and look at our story. John’s gospel is called the gospel of signs. That’s because the miracles that we see Jesus working are all signs of who Jesus is and who God is and how God works in the world. Right at the beginning of the gospel we’re told in fact that Jesus comes into the world, the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, explicitly to show us God. And then the miracles which begin with Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, which is a sign of abundance and God’s love poured out into the world. The miracles then culminate with the raising of Lazarus. They are all signs of God’s love for the world God has created. The miracles are only important insofar as they **point** to God and to what God desires for us.

So look at the rich detail of this story. First, it’s a story of family life and family love. Two sisters and a brother, clearly devoted to one another. And this family has a particular friend. We are told a little earlier in the story that Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And then when Jesus learns of Lazarus’ death, we see the evidence of that love in the tears Jesus weeps at the bad news. So here Jesus is – in the midst of family life and love and friendship. And in the midst of human grief when love seems lost. That’s where Jesus is, meaning, that’s where God is. So Jesus blesses the love of family and the love of friends. And Jesus grieves when those loving relationships appear to be separated

by death. But he doesn't stop there. The sign that Jesus now shows who God is and what God does in the world is that God's love transcends death. Not even death can separate God from God's beloved and from each other.

"Lazarus, come out."

And so he does. Stinking to high heaven, yet alive.

"Unbind him and let him go."

And they did. And we're told that many who had come to observe all of this began to believe in Jesus, which is to say, they began to understand how God works in the world.

So a couple of things to say here. I don't know about you, but there are plenty of times when I know I stinketh. Sometimes I stinketh more than others, but I do try to be aware of it. And I'm sure aware of how bound up I can be. Bound up and wound up by fear and insecurity and my own sin. And thank God that Jesus still calls me out from the tomb because I sure need it. How about you? Do you ever feel bound up in your fears and insecurities? Is your sin binding you and standing in the way of experiencing the richness of life, the wonder of real love and friendship? The sign of the story of Lazarus and the promise of the story of Lazarus is that Jesus calls us out of the tomb of selfishness and fear and self-centeredness into the light of day. And he calls us into relationships – whole and healed relationships – with friends and family.

The second thing I want to say about this story is that Jesus meets us in our grief. That's where he met Martha and Mary and he brought healing to them in the midst of his own grief. Jesus himself wasn't afraid to grieve. Something we might all remember. Sometimes we want to hide our grief or run away from it. Not a winning strategy.

I want to commend to you a piece in this month's Collect, our parish newsletter, that's just been published. It's by Arne Hendrickson, our wonderful senior warden. It's about grief. About Arne's grief around the death of his dear Mom this past summer. Arne's honesty and transparency is pretty wonderful. Here's what he says:

My mom passed away very peacefully on July 8<sup>th</sup> at the age of 88. It hit me hard. My mom was a special woman who was very strong-willed and incredibly driven. She had the charming habit of putting me on a pedestal and frequently using me as a perfect example of what a child should be. Not surprisingly, this was of great irritation to my sister.

I loved my mom, and her passing affected me deeply. I have never experienced anything like the veil of grief has overcome me in the days and months that

followed. I describe it as a fog that has the inconvenient effect of immediately incapacitating me, mentally and physically. I become incapable of making the simplest of decisions, and at times I've just had to shut down until it lifts.

Fortunately, an inner voice told me to seek help so I reached out to Father Steve, who is a professionally trained therapist and counselor. With Steve's help, I believe I am back on track and getting better each day. Father Steve's guidance and prayerful support helped me understand that getting back on track meant getting back on a spiritual path. I thank God every day that I am blessed to have my mom as long as I did. She taught me, in her own unique way to be strong for others and to be kind to all.

If you are experiencing personal difficulties, grief, or any of life's other challenges, I urge you to speak to our clergy. I am glad I did."

Arne reminds us that there is a deeply spiritual path through grief. And in fact some of the most important spiritual work we will ever do will be to allow Jesus into our lives in the midst of our grief. The sign that Jesus showed to the astonished onlookers 2000 years ago as Lazarus emerged from the tomb is that God's love is stronger than death. In Jesus the grave isn't big enough to hold us. We may stinketh, for sure, but that's not the end of the story.

No, the story continues. The story of the raising of Lazarus, the last of the seven signs in John's gospel, was meant to point to the ultimate sign of God's love in the world. The Resurrection. In the meantime, Jesus walks with us in the midst of our grief and invites us to emerge from the tomb of insecurity and fear into the light of eternal life – which begins now.

So now on this All Saints' Day is the time for us to remember those we love but see no longer. They are part of that mighty cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, who are rejoicing with Lazarus in Heaven. As these names are read, please feel free to say either silently or out loud, the names of any of your beloved dear ones who might not happen to be on this list.

Yes, these are all saints, the saints of God.

(The necrology is read)

Amen.