

When our middle daughter was a student at Penn State, down in Happy Valley, PA, found that there really is only one good way from here to there – ultimately you have to get on I 99 and take it to State College. In my perhaps wrapped sense of humor, I always found it amusing that on I99 as you are coming out of State College, there's a sign that reads: "State Correctional Facility next right. Do not pick up hitchhikers." Is the real meaning of that sign meant to be a warning that people escape from the prison all the time?

I remember reading about two other rather amusing signs. "Men working. Prepared to be annoyed." Then there was the one that had big bold letters saying, "Caution! This sign has sharp edges. Do not touch the edges of this sign." Then below in tiny letters the sign reads: "Also, the bridge is out ahead."

When you are driving you pay attention to the signs – at least, I hope you pay attention to the signs. When you are finding your way through a major airport, you read the signs. When you want to know what you are looking at in a museum, you read the signs.

Signs are everywhere. There are many meanings to the word "sign." A sign can be anything from a banner to follow, to proof, to an identifying mark.

John's gospel is often called the Book of Signs. For this gospel writer, a sign is a miracle. And the purpose of the miracle is more than just to help the recipient of the miracle, the purpose is also to point the way to the truth about who Jesus is – that is that Jesus is the Christ.

Today's scripture lesson is the seventh of the seven signs in John's gospel. Without opening your Bibles, you probably can guess what the other six signs are: changing water into wine at the wedding of Cana (2:1-11), healing the royal official's son in Capernaum (4:46-54), healing the paralytic at Bethesda (5:1-15), feeding the 5000 (6:5-14), Jesus walking on water (6:16-24), and healing the man blind from birth (9:1-7). Today's sign is the seventh sign – the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

The story is powerful. And there are a lot of different ways we can approach this story. Today, I'd like to approach it in a rather different way. I'd like to approach it as a sign or metaphor for what it means for us to be Christ-like.

The first thing I notice is that Jesus wept. That's not quite what I'd expect him to do. Prior to weeping, he had assured Martha that Lazarus would rise. So if he knew what was going to happen, why weep?

Well, why weep is because he cared. When he saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved. He was compassionate in the face of Mary's grief. He didn't run from or dismiss Mary's strong feelings. He hung in there with her. He cared.

You know, cemeteries aren't usually places where people feel comfortable. Witnessing an outpouring of grief doesn't usually make people comfortable. Yet, that didn't stop Jesus. He approached Mary and the situation from a place of love and care within. As Henri Nouwen would have said, he came along side Mary offering his non-anxious presence.

When we follow the way of Christ, we care. That may mean that we have to place ourselves in situations that don't make us feel comfortable for whatever reason. Nevertheless, we go and meet people at their place of need – and in this case, for Mary, her place of need was at the tomb of Lazarus. We work from within ourselves from a place of concern, compassion and respect for individuals.

How many of you have seen the ad that features the little girl saying that she posted on the Internet, "I got bullied for wearing glasses. Share if you are against bullying." Isn't a heart-warming ad? What struck me was the comment that the mom made: "all the kind comments have brought my child joy." We all can give a kind comment, can't we?

As I was working on this, I decided to challenge myself to think of three simple ways I could care more for others? I want to go beyond the usual bouquet of flowers or a thinking of you card or a plate of cookies. So far what I've come up with writing a note to someone and in it describe some small act that they've done that has made a big difference in my life – a "you matter to me because..." note. I challenge you to do the same – to come up with three simple ways you can care more for others. Caring – the way of Christ.

Anyway, back to the story – after Jesus came along side Mary, so full of compassion for her and for Lazarus that it overflowed in his own tears, Jesus did something bold. He said, "Roll away the stone." I just love this about Jesus. For the number of times that Jesus said to the disciples and says to us, "Do not be afraid," here's Jesus clearly not being afraid himself. He's not afraid of what might be in the tomb. He's not afraid of what might come out of the tomb. He's willing to endure whatever smell or sight or sound they encounter when they open the tomb.

And not only is he not afraid. He calls Lazarus forth. "Lazarus, come out!" He calls forth life and vitality. He calls forth everything that is the opposite of dead, death, paralysis, slinkiness, and more.

With that said, have you ever thought of part of being Christ-like is that we also are to call forth the best out of people? We are to call forth greatness in people. Another way to say it is that in following the way of Christ, we are to call forth out of people their best, most full of life selves.

If this is something that you've never thought about before, then perhaps the best way to begin to think about it is: who calls forth greatness in you? Who are the people in your life that relate to you in a way that they bring out the best in you?

At the time that I wrote this sermon, I was in the middle of reading Austin Channing Brown's latest book: "I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness." As we all know, when people relate to others not from caring or kindness but from a place of racism in their hearts, they aren't inclined then to call forth the best in other people – and they aren't calling forth the best in themselves. This is a great book and I recommend that you read it, but in the meantime, I noted the very few people in Austin's life who called forth greatness in her. In her college days, there were two professors – Dr. McMath and Dr. Simms. She also mentions her grandmother. Can you, like Austin, name some people who have called forth the best out of you?

From there, then the next question is: when was the last time you called forth the greatness, the life and vitality of another person?

There's one last thing we've got to talk about here. That's what happens next in our story. Lazarus walks out of the tomb. There was still one problem. Lazarus was still bound by the burial clothes. That's when Jesus orders the people saying, "Unbind him and let him go." With that, I hear an invitation to us from Jesus to help people get unbound from whatever is limiting them, whatever is binding them up so that they cannot live a full life.

Certainly, we have many institutions that help unbind people from the systems that have them caught – systems like poverty, poor housing, an environmental disaster, and more. There are institutions and organizations that work to unbind people caught up in various kinds of addictions. Healthy Kitchens is an effort to unbind people from the unhealthy food patterns they are in and can't break free from. Habitat for Humanity works to unbind people from the web of high housing costs, limited income and poor housing options. This week we remembered Aretha Franklin upon her passing, and remember not just her music but her work to unbind people from the horrible social construct we call racism and with her passing, we are reminded that we are all called to work for an end to racism by our God who requires from us justice.

On a day-to-day basis, we can help people get unbound. For example, I think that grace, mercy and forgiveness are huge in unbinding people from the hurts they have suffered – and funny how, that works - as they are unbound, we are too.

The bottom line is this: there is at least one Lazarus within your circle of people, waiting for you to care, to call forth and to unbind. What about you pinpointing that person and seeing what you can do?

