

All Saints (B)

Jn 11.32-44

Lots going on today: where to begin? Today we observe one of the principal feasts of the church year, the feast of all the saints; that's worth talking about. Today we baptize several new members into the Body of Christ; that's worth talking about, too. Today we commit a pledge of our time, our talents, and our treasure to the mission and ministries of Trinity Cathedral for the coming year; we've heard a lot about that over the past few weeks, but I dare say there may still be something to be said about that. And, of course, we have this rather remarkable story from John's gospel; lots and lots to talk about there. Where to begin?

If there is a unifying theme or a thread that holds all of this together, I believe it's to be found in the words Jesus speaks at the end of our gospel lesson: "Unbind him, and let him go." That phrase captures the meaning of everything we do here this day. It speaks simultaneously of our need for deliverance, of our redemption in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and of God's sovereignty over all things and his victory over every form of oppression, rebellion, and brokenness. In other words, this phrase has something to tell us not only about the ministry of Christ but about baptism, about our observance of All Saints, and even about stewardship.

So if you hear nothing else I say today, you should hear this one thing: "Unbind him, and let him go." That's it; that's the sermon. And you should hear those words not only relative to what they meant for Lazarus, but relative to what they mean for you. Jesus speaks these words about *us*: we have been set free of the bonds of our earthly life and raised to new life. And Jesus speaks those words *to us*: we are called to unbind others from the bonds that restrict and hamper their freedom and to help them walk in the light of new life. We are here today to be ourselves unbound, and we are here today to help unbind others.

Now let's unpack this a bit, and let's look first at the meaning these words have in our gospel lesson and what they might tell us about what's going on in this section of John's gospel. The raising of Lazarus is the final and the most dramatic of the seven major miracles Jesus performs in John. Each of these seven miracles is referred to by the gospel writer as a "sign," that is, they are intended individually and collectively to lead us to a particular conclusion. The gospel writer is clear about this intended conclusion: "these [things] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20.31).

That makes Lazarus a living sign; he becomes a walking testimony to the grace and the power of God. Simply by virtue of his being alive, he bears witness to the work of God in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Not only is he unbound from the strips of cloth that enfolded him in death, he is freed from the illness that killed him in the first place. We see in this story a corollary between God's creative work and God's redemptive work. When God creates the world, he doesn't have to wrestle and fight with cosmic forces that resist his efforts: he speaks, and it's done, and it's very good. And now, as God's redemptive work unfolds in the life and ministry of Jesus, once again God simply speaks, and it's done, and it's very good.

The lesson here for us is that all those who are in Christ Jesus have likewise been unbound from their old life. We are called to walk in newness of life, a way of freedom that is as different from that of the world as is the difference between life and death. "If anyone is in Christ," St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "they are a new creation; everything old has passed away, everything has become new" (1 Cor 5.17). Just as Christ called Lazarus, so he calls each of us, "Come out! Come out from your old life, be free of your bonds, and go your way in freedom."

That brings us to something else we do here today: we're baptizing several new members into the Body of Christ. In so doing, we're re-enacting something of the drama of the raising of Lazarus, but more importantly we're re-enacting the drama of the dying and rising of Jesus himself. In other words, baptism is both a funeral and a resurrection: we are joined to Christ in his death, so that we might be joined to him in his new life (Rom 6.3-4).

So the words "Unbind him, and let him go" have a special relevance today, because Jesus gives this instruction to us. Those who are being baptized this day are going to need unbinding; they're going to need to be shown what it means to live in the fullness of the freedom and the grace of the Christian life. That's the work of not only of parents and sponsors, that's the work of everyone here this day. Every time we witness a baptism, we're that crowd standing around the tomb, waiting to see what Jesus is going to do. And every time, Jesus says the same thing to the person being baptized: "Come out!"

There's even a part in the service for baptism where Jesus says to us, "Unbind him, and let him go." When the celebrant asks, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" the question we're being asked is, "Will you help unbind these persons? Will you help them walk in freedom and in newness of life?" And when we respond, "We will," we're saying "Yes" to the command Jesus gives us. Jesus may be the only one who can raise people from the dead, but he invites us to share with him in the work of helping people live into the fullness of the freedom he offers, a freedom that is available to all those who are joined to Christ.

And that brings us to yet another thing we do here this day: we gather to celebrate the feast of All the Saints. This observance involves a special form of unbinding because it frees us from the bondage of time. I don't say it frees us from time itself because I think time is essential to our identity as creatures. But All Saints does free us from the bondage of a particular kind of time: it frees us from the limitations of a one-dimensional view of time.

In other words, the feast of All the Saints encourages us to recognize the mysterious unity of the past, the present, and the future. We are unbound from an experience of time that would restrict us to one particular time and place; instead, we are free to enter into an experience of time that connects us to every time and every place in which God has been at work in the lives of his people.

On this day perhaps more than others all times are present to us, and we are reminded of our fellowship with the whole company of the saints. We worship with those who have gone before, we worship with those with whom we share our lives, and we worship with those who will come after us. We are reminded that God is not the god of the dead but the god of the living (Mt

12.27), and to him all times and all places are present.

What this means for us is that we are set in the midst of a fellowship whose members share with one another the good gifts they have received from God. We inherit the legacy of faith from those who have gone before: from them we receive the testimony in word and deed to the presence and work of God in history, and from them we receive the inheritance of this place and the heritage of our tradition, our worship, and our very identity. We owe them everything.

And we look ahead to those who will come after us: we owe them everything, as well. Having received the legacy of faith, we now assume the joy and the responsibility of passing it on. And thus the people of God are those who are engaged in the endless exchange of the gifts of faith, hope, and love, gifts they themselves have received from God.

And that brings us to the last thing we do here this day: today we commit a pledge of our time, our talents, and our treasure to the mission and ministries of Trinity Cathedral for the coming year. This can easily be seen as another form of unbinding. On the one hand, stewardship is one of the principal means we have for ensuring that our resources are bound and directed by us, and not we by them. When we fall into the trap of thinking our time, our talents, and our treasure *belong* to us—that ultimately we can keep them or even control them—then we inevitably find ourselves bound by them.

But when we remember that we are but stewards of these things—indeed, that we are stewards of our very lives—then we are not bound by them. This is the paradox of the strength that is made perfect through weakness: when we acknowledge our dependence we are free, but the moment we assert our independence we enslave ourselves. Stewardship is a way of unbinding ourselves.

On the other hand, stewardship is also one of the principal means whereby the potential for mission and ministry in this place is unbound. When we as a community act out of a sense of scarcity or anxiety or jealousy, our mission and ministries tend to get rather bound and limited. But when we as a community act out of a sense of abundance and fearless generosity, our mission and ministries are potentially boundless.

Just as each and every member of the church is called to a life of venturesome and generous stewardship, so too are we as a community of faith called to the same; we do this by challenging one another to greater levels of faithfulness, more extravagant forms of hope, and more inspiring acts of love, so that the fellowship of this community might not be bound by anything, but that we might be the place where people meet God.

Do you see the running theme here? The theme is freedom, freedom from all forms of bondage and oppression. As St. Paul put it in his letter to the Galatians, “You [are] called to freedom” (Gal 5.13). You are called to a life of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things” (Gal 5.22-23), and the one who walks in them walks in perfect freedom.

So may we hear the voice of Jesus when he calls us to come out of our old lives, and then may we help unbind one another so that we all may walk in newness of life, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.