

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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“(Un)Bound Together”
Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

Will you pray with me?

God, we glimpse your glory all around us, even in these hard times. Jesus prayed that his actions might bring others to an awareness of your glory, so, too, we pray for these words I speak, and the meditations of all our hearts and minds. May they bring us all closer to you. Amen.

Unbind him.

Unbind him, Jesus said to them, and let him go.

As if it were the strips of cloth that were holding him back.

As if the cloth were the great inhibitors to Lazarus’ life going forward.

There is an Eastern Orthodox tradition that says Lazarus never smiled again. Thirty more years he lived, going on to become the first bishop in Cyprus, only ever cracking a smile once, seeing a beggar steal a pot. “The clay steals the clay,” he smiled to himself, and that was that.

Unbind him.

How do you unbind someone when life, itself, is the binding?

For most of American history, we have been able to act as if our lives were entirely our own creations.

Nowhere is the idea of boot-strap-pulling-up more heralded than here.

Hard work, honest effort, and a little bit of luck, and you can do okay here, all on your own.

You do your own thing, and keep others out of the way.

This works for enough of us that it can seem true.

How many of us, worshipping right now, were told by our parents or well-meaning adult that we could be anything we wanted to be?

Sons of immigrants or farmers are always running for President, so it must be true, right?

Anecdotally it *is* true.

So much so that, when prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr., come along, telling us that we are part of inescapable networks of mutuality, it seems out of the ordinary, profound.

Rather than the simple truth.

As my colleague, Rabbi Gerson states, "We are, after all, a country that celebrates and romanticizes renegades, mavericks, self-starters. Think Top Gun. Think Hamilton. Think Lewis and Clark. We took the myth of self-sufficiency and made it our highest virtue."

All it took was a single virus – less than 1/10,000 of a millimeter in size – to expose the lie in this.

Think about that for a second. In a world that used to seem so big, everything has been shut down – your local library, coffee shop, theater – everything – has been shut down because of a sneeze an entire world away.

I have a words of assurance that I wrote forever ago, noting how the water of our baptism likely began as a glacier, melting into the ocean, and could have run in the Jordan for Jesus' baptism, before being taken up as humidity and released as rain, and flowing through our local aquifer into the baptismal font. It used to seem profound, somehow, to say that it was the same water that washed over Jesus – collapsing space and time so they meet right now, in us.

But now it simply feels true.

That is our reality now. This last month has revealed as banal truth what the poet and mystic and cleric have spent lifetimes trying to describe. You and I are one. And whether I stay home and wash my hands has direct bearing on whether or not your mother in her nursing home three states away lives or dies.

And yet, it seems to me that many of us are still in danger of missing it.

Unbind him. Jesus says.

But what does that really mean?

For far too long we've acted as if unbinding meant simply letting the straps fall.

As if bringing him back to life was simply a matter of a few straps of cloth.

But how Lazarus fares after those cloths are taken away?

That doesn't just affect him – it affects each and every one of us.

Unbinding him does not mean setting him loose, it means setting him free.

And freedom doesn't always mean a lack of restrictions. As we are all so clearly living right now, freedom – life – often means restraint. Even into the bounds of our four walls.

What if Lazarus never smiled again precisely because he came back to a world that failed to recognize that we are all one?

What if Jesus wept because this was true?

The clay steals the clay.

We have all heard the stories of the college kids who went on spring break. Or the states in the Midwest who haven't figured out how serious this is, and folks are still wandering around.

Individuals who have failed to realize how intricately their lives are bound up on others, because they have never needed to fall into the safety net that is our interdependence.

But it isn't just them, it's also us. It is fundamentally the system. At this very moment, there are inmates in Rikers, who are sick with Covid-19, who are being housed with those who are not sick, including the elderly.

There are individuals who are sick who are still working in food service, because they have to.

They are sold out of soap in the commissary.

That's right, there is no soap.

As my colleague, Rev. Kaji Dousa writes, "People in Rikers with minor offenses are being handed a DEATH SENTENCE thanks to [#COVID19](#). Right now."

All around the country there are inmates – almost entirely Black men – who are serving life sentences for minor, marijuana-related offenses. An industry, now dominated by White men and women, which states have now deemed essential. Let that sink in. Life sentences. Which very well could mean their life.

We also know the situation is similar at the border, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement holds detainees, even though the detention of people is not legally required.¹ And cases of the virus have been confirmed.

Individuals without health insurance have stayed away, for fear of the bill – spreading the virus even more broadly, more quickly, and Amazon is asking workers to cover each-others' sick leave, despite their owner making their annual salary every 11 seconds.

Unbind him. Jesus says. But the clay steals the clay.

We steal life from one another without ever realizing that we are stealing from ourselves.

If you have time on your hands, now, this is the time to advocate. Daily. To put pressure on your elected leaders – local, state, and federal – to make lasting, real change.

Now, I know there is so much trauma in this time, and I don't use that word lightly. I have spoken with many of you over this past week – or you have checked in via Zoom, or Facebook – and I know this is not easy for any of us. I know many of you are overwhelmed.

Some of us have experienced the death of a loved one – from a distance that seems cruel.

Others have lost their jobs, or watched your children lose their jobs, with very little you could do.

You have worked so many extra shifts at the hospital, or the nursing home.

Funerals have been rescheduled.

Weddings, too.

The fear of illness brings our own mortality to light in ways we didn't realize were possible.

More than one of you told me this week that you realized, in a very real way, "I may be next."

For most of us, everything is on hold, and nothing is on hold, all at the same time.

It is confusing and disorienting, and for many of us, traumatic.

And amidst all the individual traumas - the one I worry about the most – the one I tilt at windmills trying to control – well, that's the fear that we will emerge from this time without having learned the central gospel message – that what affects one affects us all.

That all human life is fundamentally, foundationally, sacred.

And our responsibility to care for.

Not simply for the other's sake, but for our own.

That we will emerge from this collective trauma without realizing that everything we are doing now – the caring for one another, the stir-crazy boredom, the long hours, the economic sacrifices – all of it – even when they don't feel like, they are acts of love that are helping stitch the world back together.

Helping to fundamentally repair the world.

Tikkun Olam, as they say in Judaism – acts that stitch the world back together in love.

All of these fundamental sacrifices are taking on the suffering of others for others, and therefore for yourself.

The world is collectively living the Gospel in a way we never have before.

And my fear is that we will think that what we are doing is simply because of the virus, rather than because this is what we should be doing *all the time*. Not the stir-crazy boredom, of course, but the sacrifices each of us are making – real, lasting, costly sacrifices – that are to ensure we all have a chance to stay healthy.

And this is the miracle and the paradox of the gospel, of the cross, for which Lazarus is only a preview. In the sacrifice – which for Jesus and for Lazarus meant real, physical death – in these sacrifices, we also find ourselves preserved.

Each restriction is, in fact, an act of *unbinding* – affording ourselves and one another the possibility of a full and rich life.

I would challenge you, therefore, to see this time as a spiritual discipline. A way of reminding yourself that we are called to love and serve one another, every day, in ways big and small.

If we do so, I am certain that what will emerge is nothing short of the glory of God. Not just right now, but always.

ⁱ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/03/civil-rights-orgs-to-ice-protect-immigrant-detainees-from-covid-19-or-release-them/>