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Where You Put the “I” – John 11:1- 45

After the horrors of World War II, there was a widespread effort to try and draw the Christian world into a single, border-ignoring faith, and various international groups tried to start this process: the World Council of Churches, Consultation on Church union, to name two. When I was in graduate school, this attempt to draw the various splinters of Christianity back into one plank was in full swing. After all, the reasoning was, and remains, we all are followers of Jesus Christ, right? Can't we make that common cause for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

But that was thirty-odd years ago, when those who went to church and loved their church and cared about their church still were quite sure that if people knew that *our* church (whatever church that was) *was here*, why, people would be pushing each other out of the way to get in the door.

That is no longer the case. Truth is, it wasn't then, either: we just didn't know it. And as more and more denominations splinter off, each assured in their hearts that they are the one, true church of Jesus Christ, and fewer and fewer people come through the doors simply because

there's a beautiful building, earnest people, a gorgeous choir, or – in really extreme cases - because they are seeking a relationship with God, things continue to move downward and outward. And the glorious goal, to bring all believers into one faith, once again unite the church on earth – as it is in heaven – has metamorphosed into smoke.

What does that have to do with the raising of Lazarus? This: Lazarus *is us*. Or, we are Lazarus, in the tomb, waiting for Jesus to come and wake us up.

Here's the point: Jesus delays going to see Lazarus in his sickness, in fact, delays leaving until after Lazarus is already dead, because what he is about to do in raising Lazarus from death will “glorify God.” God still raises us from death – individuals, churches, whole denominations – but to see that taking place we need to know what we're looking for: how we'll know the job's been done. Finding ourselves just where we were fifty or a hundred years ago won't be that sign.

More than one observer of the Christian church's history has noticed that every five hundred years or so, the church gets so wrapped up in stuff that has nothing to do with the Gospel – even opposes it – that the church has to undergo an enormous upheaval. A Reformation, to use the term that describes the church as we know it: Protestant, from the Latin *pro testari* – to publicly testify on behalf of, literally. The Protestant Church rose far different from the Roman Catholic Church it

came from, shed of much of its human worldliness, to rediscover and testify to the truth, the Good News of God.

Now, this is one way to look at applying the raising of Lazarus to our time: the church as we, and many generations, knew it is dead, wrapped up in human trappings that have bound it like Lazarus' death clothes. So, Christ comes to free it once again to be his, and his alone: Jesus says to we humans who would make Christ's Church in our own image just what he said to the bystanders at Lazarus' tomb: "Untie it." Set Christ's Church free to be: a place to find and worship Jesus, and take our forgiven and renewed selves out into a world that doesn't understand us, and be witnesses. Let it be what it was meant to be: a ship in the troubled seas of sin, a comfort to the afflicted, and an affliction to the comfortable.

Now to you and me. How can we be resurrected, not at the last day, as Martha believed, but now, like Lazarus? We have the Gospel, still; we have the church transforming, a place where we don't just let God wash over us, but work to support and grow the faith of the saints who look to the church to be a place of renewal. We should pray that, by the Spirit, we can see and shed that which is fighting against letting Christ reign in our lives; that part of us that wants salvation, but on our terms; in short, we need to be untied from the bonds that wrap us and bind us and hold us in the grave of our own making while still alive – with the help of a very, very beguiling world.

So Jesus says to Lazarus, to the church, and to each of us who seek to be his followers, “Untie them.” Set all of us free from anything that holds us back from service to Christ alone.

It’s all about where you put the “I”. You can completely change a word by putting the letter “I” in a different place: take the words “marital” and “martial,” as in war. It’s also how you put yourself in the situation: are you brought together in love to be one person (marital), or looking to fight (martial)? It’s where you put the “I”, what you are and what you do.

The same sort of thing works with “untie” and “unite” – the only difference between them is where you put the “I”. Christ, through the community of believers, unties us – and in faith, in this sacrament, we are united. Let us be untied, and unite under the banner of Christ.