

**the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström**  
**Lent 5A**  
*Ezekiel 27:1-14, John 11:32-45*

**Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC**  
**April 10, 2011**  
*word count: 2,031*

The theatre is situated in western Pennsylvania, a small equity-house that puts on musicals and plays for a summer season each year in tandem with the running of a fine restaurant and tourist compound. The original developer of the property purchased statues, or pieces of statues, from antiquity and placed them in quixotic positions around the property. A tall stone arm rises from the small lake. A nameless god in marble overlooks the weathering barn-like structure of the theatre as if he were surveying bright Olympus itself. A green, bronze statue of a woman leans around the corner of one side of a cottage porch, which is balanced by an urn on the other; all of them, cottage, urn and green woman, a little the worse for wear.

The Mountain Playhouse employs starry-eyed youth, fresh from the un-fresh environs of New York City, and happy to spend June, July and August outside of the steamy city. Thirty years ago, in 1981, I was one of them, as was Carl the year before I knew him. I was hired to play the serious student in a production of “Fiddler on the Roof.” The cast boasted only two Jews, and again, we were doing “Fiddler on the Roof.” We referred to it as, “WASPS on the Terrace,” and the name stuck. Being as we were in rural Pennsylvania, no one noticed.

It was a summer of boundless fun, surrounded by cornfields and countryside in the company of a new family of friends. The largest of the cast houses had a huge great room called, “Egypt,” for reasons no plausible explanation was ever offered. It was here that we sat up all night swapping stories and laughing until shushed by those who like to go to bed at a reasonable hour.

Mitch—funny Mitch. Jude—quiet until the right moment to get the zinger in. Stuart lived in the cottage called, “Frog Hollow.” Ben—the intern—all enthusiasm all the time. Tim—serious—wanted to be a priest. Gene, Tim’s partner—visiting, and trying to get past a mysterious ailment that wouldn’t go away, which no doctor could diagnose. There were others as well—standing back a little further into the shadows of the walls of Egypt as my memory of those times fades correspondingly.

And, that’s too bad, really, because memory is all that is left of them. Each of them, every single young man in that group with whom I formed friendships, died within ten years of that summer, only one lasting fifteen years beyond that. Gene was the first—and among the first of the men any of us knew who would die of the mysterious plague that began decimating the arts community in large cities around the country. Tim would be next. Stuart would not let himself be seen after he fell ill, and Jude quietly closed himself in his apartment with few visitors. Mitch railed against it until well after the name, “AIDS,” was given to what would take him, but not without a fight.

I suspect you all know someone...or many “someones.” I’ll ask you about them in a moment. My former roommate, Tony, a brilliant Broadway dancer, was lovingly cared into his last hours by his friend, John. My best friend was next—he had hidden everything about himself from the world, and from me, his closest friend; until he was locked away in his apartment with AIDS dementia. And, that’s when something happened. It was dubbed, “the cocktail,” and it became as much about resurrection as Lazarus himself. My friend, and now millions of people like him the world over, have walked away from the graves that surely would have held them, because people insisted, demanded, raised money for research, found allies and eventually even turned the heart of many of our church traditions from the condemnation, fear and exclusion of the 1980’s to the new found compassion of today.

What does the message of Jesus have to say about the global HIV/AIDS Pandemic? As a people entrusted with the story of love, hope and inclusion called, “Gospel,” how will the church carry out our mission in a 21st century world where millions continue to die, especially among the poor, because of a disease that is both preventable and treatable?

A group co-founded by Bono and Bob Geldorf (among others) called, “One,”<sup>1</sup> aims at reducing world poverty and disease. It is this grassroots advocacy organization that has reached out to churches around the world and asked us to call today, “Lazarus Sunday” in recognition of the miracles, as one African woman named her own recovery, of “resurrection from the bed,” and into recovery after a forty day journey and transition from death to life through anti-retroviral medication. This one woman’s Lazarus experience mirrors some three million others and growing, who are becoming well again due to the efforts of good people everywhere that have enabled free clinics to open up in the areas where AIDS has hit hardest, particularly in Africa.

The work continues here in this room as well. Three weeks from today, IUCC will walk in the AIDS Walk again, this time at Disneyland, though unfortunately scheduled for all of our churches on a Sunday morning, and for us, during our Women’s Retreat.

Our team is called, “IUCC Walk the Walkers,” and that is exactly what we have been doing since the beginning of the OC AIDS Walk, coming in consistently at or near first place in faith organizations. Because of the scheduling challenges this year, please consider signing up as a walker, or sponsoring one. (*Who here is walking?*)

Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones provides a model that resonates profoundly with the current HIV/AIDS pandemic among the world’s poor. God leads Ezekiel into the valley and involves the prophet in the bringing of new life. The work begins and ends with God, but in the story of the vision of Ezekiel, God insists that human action is included in the life-giving transformation of the world.

Like Ezekiel surveying the dry bones of exiled Israel, today’s believers also must remain compassionately aware of the desolation felt by the first waves of Americans suffering from HIV who were cast off from their families, religious institutions and society, and a generation of African people crying “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Such awareness participates in the prophetic voice of faith speaking up in order to summon a life-giving response from each of the four winds, which today might include faith communities, governments, businesses and individuals.

The story of Lazarus is a story about watching helplessly as a person you love passes from life to death, while hoping that some healing agent would arrive in time. Each of us, at some time, lives such Mary and Martha moments. It is also about the deep relief and joy that comes in the miraculous healing that does occur when Jesus raises Lazarus.

But the story is also an incentive to build a society based on love, justice and peace, with its hearers prepared to advocate on behalf of those facing poverty, disease and death; arriving in time to witness “Lazarus moments.”

We hear Mary complaining to Jesus, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Not having the supernatural powers that enable us to undo what has been done too late, the story insists that we arrive on time with the powers of compassion, educating and planning, so that others will be raised up.

Jesus is coming to his last walk to Jerusalem, and we read this in the sections that bookend the Lazarus story. They serve as a warning that conformity to Jesus’ life of faithfulness to serving God can be costly. It is the cost of giving love to the world; a love that desires abundant life for all.

David Lull, Professor of New Testament at Wartburg Theological Seminary, says, “Powerful people and systemic forces make up ‘national interests and the global economy. They are formidable adversaries against serving [Creation’s] desire that the whole world have abundant life.

“Humanistic values that under gird serving the poor, immigrants, people of color, and other ‘marginal’ people, who are treated as surplus or expendable, are increasingly denied a role in today’s global economy. Those who advocate for them are dismissed as ‘socialists’ and face political death. Those who advocate for ecological values in today’s global economy are dismissed as enemies of economic growth and development and face political death. It is important—no, essential—for churches to be prophetic voices in today’s world by conforming their ministry and mission to God’s love for the whole human and ecological world.

“Serving God’s love for the world begins with loving one another within our communities of faith. Churches that lack love for one another will not be credible witnesses to God’s love. Churches that see themselves as guardians of otherworldly myths and legalistic practices are neither credible nor faithful witnesses to God’s love. The Gospel for the 5th Sunday in Lent invites and calls such churches to be transformed by [the Lazarus story of resurrection,] so that they can faithfully serve God’s love for the human and ecological world.”

It is too late for Mitch, Jude, Tim, Rick, Tony, Lee, Marcia...how many names do you have? Should we just lift them up right now? (Ask for names...)

Let the memories of these saints now gone continue to empower us to insist, demand, raise money for research, find allies and eventually even turn hearts of stone to hearts of compassion, as we become the hands of Christ on earth that call those who suffer with HIV/AIDS from the tomb.

It is through advocacy that compassion and charity are energized and justice becomes attainable. As advocacy groups have started demonstrating, organizing, petitioning, and even lobbying on issues surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic, governments have listened and acted. Even churches have moved from the tremendous judgmentalism for which they were famous on this issue, public opinion has changed and new approaches to saving lives have become a reality.

As a result, millions of lives have been saved. People are no longer waiting to die. At the same time, it is vital that we continue to speak and act. Millions more remain untreated. With new solutions available, they are not waiting to die, but waiting for the chance to live.

The miracle story of Jesus raising Lazarus of Bethany from the dead in the Gospel of John is where we find the words to begin to describe what is happening in cities and villages across Africa. In our day, the Lazarus Effect is not simply a miracle; it’s a matter of smart decisions, leadership, treatment, and policy.

It is also a story of raising up of another kind; how we, like Mary and Martha, loved and cared for those for whom no miracle came, can lift the names and memories of those who were first to be taken; and through our advocacy and dogged insistence in their memory, make sure that an end is brought to this particular suffering, and that the spark that remains of those friends we hold dear continues to reside in the strength that comes forth from us in spirit to do so. Let them, and all who have suffered from disease, poverty or injustice, be raised up in such Lazarus moments showing that our own human action is imperative in the life-giving transformation of the world.

**Prayers of Intercession**

**In honor of those who are positive.**

Gathered together in care, let us pray. *A brief silence is kept.*

For your church and all those who serve you; O God, you are our God,

**Of this we are positive.**

For the resources of your creation and our use of them; O God, you are our greatest gift.

**Of this we are positive.**

For those affected by natural disasters, drought and floods, earthquakes and fires; O God, you are almighty.

**Of this we are positive.**

For just governments, honest and compassionate leaders, and conscientious civil servants; O God, you are our protector.

**Of this we are positive.**

For peace in war-torn lands, broken relationships, and troubled minds; O God, you are our serenity.

**Of this we are positive.**

For economic stability and fair wages; for the jobless, and those who are enslaved; O God, you are our guardian.

**Of this we are positive.**

For scientists who work diligently to find treatments and cures for disease; O God, you are the giver of all knowledge.

**Of this we are positive.**

For the health of every cell in our bodies, the well-being of our minds, and the openness of our hearts; O God, you are our healer and sustainer.

**Of this we are positive.**

For doctors and nurses and all those who care for the sick; O God, you are our physician.

**Of this we are positive.**

For education and awareness, for acceptance, understanding and love; O God, you are our teacher.

**Of this we are positive.**

For organizations and clinics that strive to relieve suffering; O God, you are our healing balm.

**Of this we are positive.**

For things that matter to us, cause us to worry, give us fear, and weigh us down; O God you are there.

**Of this we are positive.**

For the dying, for those who surround them, and for those who now rest in death; O God, you are our comfort in all grief.

**Of this we are positive.**

For these things and whatever else you see that we need, we pray, **Amen.**

***Sermon Resources***

1 [www.one.org](http://www.one.org)

General: [www.textthisweek.org](http://www.textthisweek.org) “Lazarus Sunday” Resources: a collection of prayers, videos, songs and “sermon starters” for addressing the issue of AIDS in Africa, in particular.

## Scripture for Sunday. April 10, 2011

### *Ezekiel 27:1-14*

1 The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." 7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

### *John 11:32-45*

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.