AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

“Lazarus At the Gate”
Rev. Daniel J. Bradley
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First United Methodist Church
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Over the past couple of weeks, we've been hearing the words of Jesus tell us in parables what the kingdom of heaven is like. And I broke from the lectionary text this week to pause, to pause for a moment, and to think about the concept of self-care. Self-care. What does that look like? You see, when I think about that word self-care, often comes the word selfishness, doesn't it? But that's not what self-care is. Self-care is necessary. Think about a world where if we didn't shower every morning, how stinky would that be. I'm sure Scott would be sitting next to Janet.[Laughter]

But what ways do we understand God? How does God work in this world? (I joked with the children that that perhaps there's people on Jupiter, as Carson suggested.) But 8.5 billion people on this Earth approximate are looking for answers. They're looking to whatever their understanding of God might be. They’re looking for God in the middle of the messes. This past week, we had a building collapse in New York City. Thousands of people stranded across the country as flights were grounded. War zones that continue, poverty, pestilence, homelessness, death. All around us can be so overwhelming. When do we pause to take care of ourselves?

You see, it's not a selfish practice to take care of yourself. It’s not a selfish practice to pause in the middle of the chaos, in the middle of the storm. It's not a selfish practice to say, "You know what? I need a break.” Years ago, I worked for Richmond County Children's Services in Mansfield, Ohio, and when I was hired, they told me I got seven sick days a year, a number of personal days after six months, and oh, by the way, three mental health days a year that didn't count against my sick time. Now, if you know anything about working in children's services, you know you know that you need more than three mental health days.

It is one of the highest burnout professions in this world, and it is because the individuals who work in that field see the ugliness of humanity, up close and personal. They see the horrific acts that parents do to their children, that relatives do to their nieces and nephews and granddaughters and grandsons, and somehow they have to reconcile that. Somehow they have to have some place to go. Where do they go? What do they do? The other thing I'll tell you about children's services is that one of the other statistics is that if you work in that field, you are ten times more likely to commit suicide, or to become dependent upon alcohol and drugs. It is one of those hard things, and the reason I tell you that this morning is, is not to not to burden you with one more thing, but to share with you the importance of taking those moments.

Yes, there are things in the world that we ought to be concerned with. There are things in the world that we should be praying for. Yes, there are things that we should be doing to help one another. But, there is also what we should be doing to help ourselves, and that is exactly what the psalmist says. The call to worship was taken right from Psalm 123. “I look up to the heavens. I look up to my God. My help comes from God.” That's where our help comes from. But our help does not mean that God gives us the supernatural power to put that big blue suit on . . . and run around the world and save the world from itself every single day. There are times when we are to be called just to be silent, to be still. To be still in the chaos, in the burdens, in the mess, and the yuck of this world. Oh, don't get me wrong. I love it when we're able to do for others. But who does for us? Who cares for us? And you know, it's not a sin to ask for God's mercy and God's grace that you might show it to yourself.

There’s a story about two monks on a journey that came through the woods to reach another monastery. They traveled for in silence for days on end, and one morning they came to a river, and a woman stood there with no idea how to get across. The elder monk put her on his back and took her across the river to the other side. And so full of gratitude and exuberance, she embraced the monk. The younger monk is somewhat confused, and he begins to get frustrated and angry. For a while, he walks, stewing until he can't take it anymore, and he accusingly asks, "How could you touch a woman? “How could you carry her across the river, or even let her embrace you? Don’t you know our rules, our vows? Don't you know? What would the elder monks think? The older monk says, "You know, I carried her across the river, but you have been carrying her all day.” I carried her across the river. You have been carrying her all day.

What if it was us that needed to be carried across that river? What if it was us? What? Maybe it is us. Maybe we're standing at that river of chaos, wondering how we're going to get through the next day, and maybe we're wondering if somebody is going to come along and carry us. But the rest of the world wants to point to point a finger. “How dare you take a break? How dare you do this? How dare you do that?” And those sentiments often come from the church. Because the church is so wrapped up in busyness, and I don't just speak for this congregation, and I don't just speak for our annual conference, I don't just speak for the greater United Methodist Church, but I speak for all the church. We're wrapped up in busyness, and we don't take the time to take care of ourselves. We don't take the time to pause.

A wise friend reminded me many times, “God's grace and mercy do not wait for us to be perfect, to be clean, to be sinless. God's grace and mercy meets us where we are, and when we encounter that grace and mercy we understand that we are not alone. We understand that God's grace and mercy are always present, but as we take hold of them, we remember that not only should we offer them to others, but we should offer them to ourselves.”

There's an old expression: "Get down off the cross, 'cause somebody else needs the wood.” Friends, life is tough. Life is a mess. It's like slogging through that sea of yuck. But **we** keep going. We keep moving forward. And while moving forward is good, it can be exhausting. It's tiring. And we can be to the point of death, like Lazarus sitting at that gate. Like Lazarus sitting at that gate.

Jeremiah was 13 when God called him into service, and he said, "Lord, I, I don't know how to speak. I don't know what to say. I'm young." You know what the Lord said? “Don’t let anybody tell you that you're young. I will put my words in your mouth. I will write them on your heart, and you will speak.” Jeremiah saw the worst of the worst. He saw the complete destruction of Israel, the demolishing of the temple. He saw women, men, children murdered. He saw villages burned and pillaged. He saw the ugliness of war, an ugliness that we can't imagine. See, warfare in biblical times, not like warfare that we see today. Not like warfare that we see today. And I imagine that that weighed heavily on Jeremiah's spirit. He’s broken. He’s shattered in pain and suffering. But somehow he musters those words, those words out of Lamentations, those words that often lament suffering. But Jeremiah musters everything that he has left, to remind himself, to remind Israel that God has now walked away from them or forsaken them.

Imagine yourself in the middle of the worst war zone ever. Bombs being dropped, loss of friends, families, complete destruction of cities, homes, hospitals. What would you feel in that moment? Poverty, displacement, illness, mass graves being filled with their loved ones. What would you feel in that moment? See, that's what Jeremiah was experiencing—that kind of darkness. Yet somehow he recalls the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. “**Great is your faithfulness**. ‘The Lord is my portion, says my soul.’ Therefore, I will hope in Him.” “The Lord is good to those who” what?

“Who wait for Him. The soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.”

Taking care of ourselves is not selfishness. There's nothing wrong with it. It's something important, because in those moments when we are like Lazarus, ready to die, we hear those words of Jeremiah. And I imagine Lazarus heard them loud and clear, words that he had heard all of his life as his training as an Israelite. Something interesting I want to comment upon this passage of Lazarus. You remember where it says, "And the dogs even came and licked his sores”? You see, dogs in that day were not domesticated. They were huge, beastly, nasty dogs, and they would lick the sores, waiting for him to die so they might devour his flesh. That was not comfort for Lazarus. That was pain and suffering.

We do need to pause. We need to put our phone in airplane mode. We need to shut down. Now, let me tell you something. Self-care doesn't look like a spa day. It doesn't look like facials and massages. Self-care simply looks like being quiet. It means sitting with an old friend. It means opening up a book. It means basking in the glory of God. What was it we heard about a giant buck this morning? And I joked, yeah, it's hunting season. But there again, the beauty of God. I can't tell you how many deer we see in our backyard every single day. The beauty of God in creation. We need to understand that we are a part of creation.

The rich man walked by Lazarus every day, paid no attention. The community took notice of him not, but God did. And we may think that as we sit by that gate, ready to die, that no one sees our pain, our suffering, our despair, or our grief, but God does. And God simply asked us, "Lift your eyes heavenward, lift your eyes heavenward, put your hope, put your trust, put your faith. Put all that you have in me, that I might give you rest, that I might provide you comfort, and in that comfort, restoration, wholeness, healing—not busyness, but grace. When life falls apart, bills become too much to bear, marriages fail, family members struggle, and hope seems like it's gone, thanksgiving meals resemble warfare between one another—we look heavenward to God, and we ask God not only to intervene in those situations, but to take care of us, our bodies, our mind, and our soul.

Life is not a mess. It is a beautiful mess, and it is because in that mess that God works. It is in that mess that God gives us hope. Let us never forget where Jeremiah was, a 13-year-old boy witnessing such horrific acts, but yet somehow he finds the words to muster some comfort for himself, some comfort for Israel.

Do one thing for me today: live a life for yourself this afternoon. Look heavenward. Put your phone in airplane mode. Be quiet and let God give you rest. We all need it. We all need it. If we don't rest, we're no good to anyone else. Amen.