Richard: The gospel of John is structured in an amazing way. Instead of a mere over overview of Jesus’ activities with his followers that we find in Matthew Mark and Luke, in John we find these wonderfully expansive long stories. This is the third of those chapter long stories that we have been reading through the season of Lent. Intimate narratives that are interactions with people who he engages. For these three weeks have we seen Jesus interact with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind. And now this day, Jesus’ powerful drama with his good friends, Martha, Mary and Larazus. These are wonderful ways to delve deeply into our understanding of who really Jesus is. So, we just heard this story of Jesus raising Lazarus. What are some of the images for you, Mike, that come out of this story?

Michael: That’s a great question Dick and before we get into those images, I am just going to talk about me a little bit as I love to do. For those of you who don’t know, I am a huge sports fan, and, college basketball. Growing up, come March every year, I was one of those kids who waited for the special edition of Sports Illustrated that would come out with the bracket for the men’s NCAA basketball tournament in the paper format, because I didn’t have cable tv. And all the hype .. all the lead up .. all the anticipate to this tournament. And over the years, the love of college basketball has been something that has been expanded throughout my family to the point where my cousin hosts a watch party for the first two days of the tournament every single year at his house. I was actually supposed to be in Maryland last week to see my family, to hang out with them and to see some college basketball. However, as you all know, we are in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic which means that everything is being put on hold. From travel to work, restaurants, school, being able to visit folks who are in the hospital, shaking hands, playing board games with friends, even sports. Everything is on hold. And so which is why I think, for me, the most striking things for me this week out of the entire text is related to the context of the present time we are in, which is verses five and six where the narrator says ‘Accordingly, thought Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.’ And so, one of the things I am thinking about right from the beginning is, why did Jesus stay put? You know, the one who Jesus loved, Lazarus was ill, and Jesus seemed to know that he would die. So it’s not like Jesus was thinking that somehow Lazarus was going to get better, so my question is, why Jesus, why do you choose to stay knowing full well that you can go and be with the ones who you love in this case with Martha and Mary and with Lazarus. I know in the present time, being a huge extrovert, and even my wife Hele who is an introvert, we are discovering how hard it is to be here in isolation at our own home. We can’t wait to see friends and loved ones and even those of you who are home watching this now – to be with our church family as well. All of this waiting, this wait-and-see, we are supposed to be healthy but wait. So I can only imagine for Martha and Mary and even Lazarus, this deep longing that
they had to be able to see Jesus. I am wondering, Dick, I think there is something much deeper going on here than just Jesus waiting for two days. We know that Jesus isn’t cruel – it is for something that is much larger. It is for something which is for God’s glory Jesus says. I am wondering if you have any thoughts on that.

Richard: I was going to say, this is always a disturbing text in that Jesus knows that his friend is ill and yet waits. Again, what the text tells us is very clearly ‘I am doing this in a way to show the glory of God. Which I think is sometimes difficult for people to understand when we are going through difficult times. Is God doing this for some purpose or glory. I don’t think that is exactly what is being talked about here, but there is that sense of this waiting and not knowing that is often very frightening. I think the other thing that is really interesting about this particular waiting, is that the disciples, especially in the gospel of John, are like these people who are keeping Jesus from doing certain things. When Jesus indicates that he is going to go to Jerusalem, he is going to see Lazarus, immediately disciples stand up and say ‘wait a minute, are you aware what is going there? They are stoning the prophets there. Why would you ever want to go?’ So, I think the other thing that is going on in this particular text is this kind of situation of the limitation that the disciples are putting on Jesus .. not only in this story but in every one of those long stories that we have been reading during Lent. So, my question would be, what are those limitations that we are putting on – where do we find limitations from being isolated? Are there things that we impose upon ourselves that limit us from our ability to truly be what Jesus ultimately is in this story, which is that who brings life and glory to the world through his healing of Lazarus.

Michael: I think that is a really great point, in terms of being limited. And I wonder – I think one of the great things about the gospel of John that (well, a couple of them right?) I think one of them is the relationality that Jesus shows, the intimacy of the gospel of John... in the sense of those limits, Jesus, from the very beginning, we see Jesus at the wedding at Cana, he is hanging out with his pals at the wedding feast which, for me, is thinking of “traditional” Jesus – I don’t necessarily just picture Jesus just hanging out with friends. But then you have, two weeks ago, the gospel of the woman at the well. Jesus is only modeling how to go past those limitations. Jesus isn’t supposed to be speaking with the woman who is at the well and yet he sets down and engages her in conversation. Last week with the man who is born blind, Jesus spits into the dirt, makes mud and actually touches the person’s eyes and tells him to go wash. So we see a very tactile Jesus. The same in the next chapter, chapter 12, we see a resurrected Lazarus reclining against Jesus and they are having a meal together. All the way to the very end, to the cross. In the gospel of John we see the women who were so close to Jesus that Jesus can talk to them while he is hanging on the cross, and so even in the midst of those hard things, those challenging things, the things that cause so much death for Jesus, in terms of the cross, there is an intimacy .. a relationship. And so that actually has given me hope in a time of right now when we see death and illness all around us in the news channels and maybe even within our circles. There are folks you know that have COVID-19 or those who are seeking treatment for other things but because of the pandemic they aren’t able to seek that
treatment. This is what I am saying, it seems so hard but even in those
desperate times, there is some sort of relationality. I think another thing, one of
our things that both of us agree on, about the gospel of John, is that Jesus
show so much emotion. Jesus is divine and Jesus is human and in this
chapter Jesus weeps. I know I shouldn’t be getting so excited about Jesus
weeping, and yet I am so comforted by a god who does weep. God/Jesus who
feels sadness and happiness. Dick, I know you and I feel the same about this.
So, I am wondering if you have any thoughts on Jesus weeping here.

Richard: I think it is fascinating that in the gospel of John, Jesus oftentimes
use the word “love” as being *agape*, the Greek word for love which is the self-
giving love – almost this idea that I am coming to save you. But in this
particular passage, the love that Jesus talks about when he talks about loving
Lazarus is *philios/philia*, or brotherly or sisterly affection... not the love of this
divine savior love. I think this is fascinating because it really speaks to exactly
what you were talking about, Mike, which is that Jesus has this deep
friendship and he is weeping because that friendship has, at least for the
moment, ended and it gives us a tremendous amount of confidence to know
that when we are going through the most difficult moments of our lives, that
God weeps with us, and holds us and understands us. Yes, to me that is
incredibly powerful.

Michael: I think in the midst of this love, of this *philios* – of this
brotherly/sisterly love, that Jesus is showing, I am taken back to a thought
that Helen, my wife, and I were talking as I was preparing for the text this
week. What is remarkable is that all of the solidarity that is shown to Mary and
Martha by the surrounding community before Jesus arrives. We see in the text
that the surrounding community is there to console them. And they run out
with Mary because they think she is going to the tomb to grieve Lazarus when
in reality, she is going to meet Jesus. So, I think in the midst of when there is
death, when there is illness ... in the midst of this period that we are in now
ourselves, I think and wonder how are we being in solidarity with one another.
So, I think some of the hidden heroes and heroines in the story are actually, for
me, in this sense, is the community of the people that are enveloping Mary and
Martha in the midst of their own waiting. And this past week, for myself, how
am I connecting with others? This past week I was able to have couple of
virtual “happy hours” over Zoom with family and friends. And I know our music
director, Anne Krentz Organ, and I were talking and sharing a bit, and she had
one with her family as well. So, there is a lot of joy that comes in the midst of
this time of waiting. Being able to connect with one another during this time of
isolation is so very important and so needed. Being in relationship with one
another is so needed in this time and I think it doesn’t have to be ‘happy hours’
or ‘coffee hours’ virtually, but in the sense of how can we donate to local food
pantries? With many who are already food insecure, losing their jobs, etc.,
looking to having to seek unemployment benefits, there is going to be more and
more of a need to be in solidarity with those who need support. Maybe another
way is calling a member of our congregation who you know doesn’t have access
to watch these sermons, this dialogue, our service today... how are we checking
in on those individuals who are vulnerable? What are maybe grieving etc.? I
think another way is, as Jesus calls us into relationship with one another, how
do we feel called into relationship with those who are considered ‘essential employees’? And I think one of the beautiful things we can express our love and be in solidarity with those essential employees by actually staying in our houses during this time. So I think of that as ways to be in solidarity, to express this brotherly/sisterly love with one another during this. Do you have any thoughts that as well, Dick?

Richard: I think the fascinating part about this story is that the story doesn’t end with Lazarus coming out of the grave, it is when the community unbinds him. That is kind of where this unbinding comes, so what is it that binds us from being able to be fully present to one another. I think that is the most important to the story that I see is that to not allow us to be bound by those people who are kind of holding us back but to listen carefully and try always to try new things that may even feel uncomfortable. I mean this is not usually the comfort level that I have even doing this but it is an exciting new opportunity to be able to reach people which I probably have been a little adverse to over the years. But I think you realize when you are unbounded, when you really are open to God’s spirit that things can really happen that you never, ever imagined happening. I think that is what happens here at the end of the story. Lazarus comes out – he’s breathing, he’s unbounded, and the whole community starts to witness the life that Jesus offers. I really think that’s kind of cool!

Michael Absolutely, and I just encourage out viewers today (and I will say viewers in this format where I would typically say our parishioners and those in the pews), but just to look for ways to be in solidarity with those around you during this time. Family, friends, neighbors, etc. With that, thank you so much and hope you enjoyed this new way doing this sermon dialogue this week. Blessings to you. Continue to reach out us, Pastor Johnson and myself, as we continue to care for you during this time period. Amen.