

*Parallel Paths: This Is What Love Looks Like in Public*

John 11:38-44

In case you have not met her before, let me introduce you to Wangari Maathai, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

Video - <https://youtu.be/Es6eVgmPWJM>

In the story that we read this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus is at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Lazarus has been dead four days. Jesus is upset; this is his friend who died, and even Jesus had not been able to keep that death away. But Jesus would do everything he could now. Everyone could see how much he loved this man who had died. And so Jesus summoned up all his power. Before anything happened at all, he turned his face toward God and gave thanks; a good practice. And then Jesus spoke, with all the confidence and power that God-on-earth has, and mostly we think we do not have. “Lazarus, come out of the grave.” Lazarus came out, moving—like a person alive. But the work was not finished. There was one more thing needed, for Lazarus to come fully alive again. “Unbind him,” Jesus said to the other people standing around. “Take those burial cloths that are wrapped around Lazarus, tying him up so he can’t move. Unbind him and let him go.”

Wouldn’t you think Jesus would have wanted to do that last bit of triumphant victory-over-death thing himself? Unwrapped his friend’s body with a flourish so that he could be the first one to shake his hand or give him a hug? Why did he tell Lazarus’ sisters, or other friends, or neighbors, to remove the cloths?

Maybe there are some things that even Jesus can’t do. Maybe removing the cloths, or the ropes, or the chains, that bind people and keep them from breathing fully and deeply is something we have to do for one another. Something that *only* we can do. I hear an echo of another story of Jesus—when there were many people—thousands of people—and the disciples wanted to send them away so they could buy food for themselves. “You give them something to eat,” Jesus said. He made sure the food they had was enough, but they had to feed one another. “Unbind him,” Jesus said to the people who had come to stand at Lazarus’ tomb. We are the ones who imprison one another, and we are the ones who must set each other free.

When Wangari Maathai looked around her country, Kenya, she saw that her people were bound—imprisoned, really—in a land that had been stripped clear of the trees that used to provide shade, firewood, food, stability for the soil. And the people had been stripped of hope, their sense of connection to the land that had once been sacred to them. They were tied to a system that oppressed them in many ways. The people complained, but they felt powerless over a government that would not hear them.

What could they do? Maathai started with women. In Africa—like in much of the world—women are responsible for feeding their families. They plant and harvest the crops. If the land is damaged, the women know it first. If the water or the food is tainted, their babies will cry. If the well goes dry, women go and find new sources of water. They could blame the government, the

people who had power; but complaining was not likely to make change, and it would only leave them feeling like victims. And so, instead, the women began to do what they could do, however small it was. They planted trees. With no particular training, or technology, or funding; they began to plant trees. They were told they didn't have the "appropriate technology" to do this work, but they used the method that worked for them: take a pot, put in the soil, put in the seeds. Put the pot up somewhere where the chickens and goats can't eat the seedlings. That's it.

The women began to feel empowered. Together, they planted 30 million trees. Those trees began to provide food, shelter, and even income. Gradually, the women realized that they did not need the government to save them. They could do something themselves that made a difference. And so they kept going. When they saw the government acting in a way that hurt people, they protested. When the police told them to go home, they stayed. Even when they were beaten and taken to jail, they did not give up...because they had learned that they too had power to improve their country, and their own lives.

The trees themselves were an important improvement to Kenya, but trees were most useful as the tools through which the people learned to be free, to practice taking action. The movement that Wangari Maathai began is called the *Green Belt Movement*. All over the developing world now, the Green Belt Movement invites people to plant trees to free them from their sense that nothing can be done, that their lives are hopeless.

This is what she saw in her country: When the Europeans came to Africa, the communities that had always looked to nature for inspiration and food, beauty, spirituality, were told that their ways were primitive, worthless. They were told that the ancient cultures stood in the way of progress. And so, the people of Kenya gave up their culture. They let their forests be clear-cut; they let their mountains be treated as though they were not sacred. And this is what Wangari Maathai has said about this:

*People without culture feel insecure. They are obsessed with the acquisition of material things, which give them a temporary security that is only a delusion. Without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance. It grows weak and vulnerable. It disintegrates from within; it suffers a lack of identity, dignity, self-respect, and a sense of destiny.*

*When the Green Belt Movement holds seminars and teaches people why it is important to plant trees, to save their own land and culture, we invite them to hold up their own mirror and find out who they are. This is why we call the seminars kwimenya (self-knowledge in Kinyarwanda). Until then, the participants have looked through someone else's mirror—the mirror of the missionaries or their teachers or the colonial authorities who have told them who they are and who will write and speak about them. They have looked at only cracked reflections; they have seen only a distorted image.*

"You unbind him," Jesus said to the people who watched Lazarus come back to life. You have the power—and the responsibility—to set others free, so that they can live fully the life God has given them.

When you think about it, “unbinding”—loosening the ropes, opening the doors, lifting the burdens that weigh down hearts and our bodies—doesn’t always require a set of “right beliefs”. You can stop and untie anyone—including someone who’s walking on a path that is not yours. Someone walking on another path can stop and unbind you too.

Cornel West once said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” Justice: making this world a place where all people can live fully human, fully alive, fully who God created them to be. Sometimes the tool for making justice is trees. And sometimes it’s whatever we are holding in our hands.