

“Challenge and Blessing” [John 11: 21-39a]

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I want to share some thoughts based on the last verse that was read from the Gospel lesson, the first part of verse 39: *Jesus said, “Take away the stone.”* I have no doubt that the majority of the congregation is looking for a blessing here at Knox, and in Kincardine in the new ministry that is coming. I have no doubt that many of you are expecting a great work to be done here. If you are not expecting this, I invite you to consider it. I believe that we, collectively and individually, need to realize that if God does not do a great and mighty work in our midst, it will not be His fault but ours. I find many people say, *“We must wait until God works, and, when God is ready we will see a great work.”* The way I read the Bible and my understanding of Scripture, God is always ready.

Many of our community are like the early Hebrew people who believed that there is a “set time,” coming for God to favour us. I believe that the set time is when you and I get ready to let God work with us, and when we choose to roll away the stones that prevent His coming into our souls. We must take away the stones; someone must roll them off so the Lord can get at us. There is no doubt that He can send down legions of angels to clear away every stone. If one word were to come out of His mouth, every stone like obstacle in His path would suddenly disappear as did Satan from His presence in the wilderness. But God does not work that way. He works through others. He did not roll away the stone from Lazarus’ grave. He said to His disciples and says to us, *“Take away the stone”*.

When we look around there are many modern Christians, wonderful people, who want God to roll away the stone, and when God does not answer their prayer, they blame God. One of the lessons from our text often overlooked is that God works in partnership. It is an affirmation of what many have said before, *“God will not do for His people what they can do for themselves.”* The failure to second guess God’s response or His ways to carry out works, stems from unbelief. A half hearted person does not believe God will grant their prayer anyway. The mother who prays for the reclaiming of a child must faithfully do her part to that end and then have full belief that God will do the rest.

There is something for all of us to do for our fellow brother’s and sisters and it is usually the stone of unbelief that blocks the way. It is this great stone that must first be rolled out of the way in our congregation and in our community. If we believe that God can do a great work here, that practical belief will make us work as diligently as we ought. It will be hard work but with this lever of faith, it can be done. There must be honest work, a lifting up of one’s self first as far as possible and then leaving the rest to God whose word will completely roll away the stone and raise the dead.

Lazarus’ resurrection was physical. We need to work for the resurrection of souls. When we ponder from our comfort zone, how dead is our sense of sin! We become complacent and forgetful that iniquity cannot live in our heart without affecting how we live, act and behave. In our busy world of self accomplishment, there are many who are lukewarm to the love of God and I believe that is why there is so much selfish and cold thoughts towards our neighbours. We profess to be Christians but we know our standards could fly much higher. Within our own lives and those around us, we should feel the joys of sins forgiven and the rekindling of the early fires of faith and holy living. If anyone is not Christ-like in their behaviour, they need not expect to be taken seriously as an example by their godless neighbour. I remember an illustration I first heard when I was a boy told

by my minister. You may have heard it too. The Apostle Paul stood with a crowd around a fire warming himself after escaping a shipwreck, when, as they piled wood on the fire, a viper sprang out of the flames and fastened itself to his hand. Immediately the gasping crowd cried out that he was a reprobate, whom, though he had escaped from the shipwreck, vengeance would not let him live. Eventually Paul shook the viper off his hand into the fire. When they saw that he did not die, they changed their opinion entirely. Paul then stayed there and preached the saving word of life to them. The apostle shook off the viper and the confidence of the people flowed out to him.

I believe that as Christians we are to imitate this example with God's help and shake off the vipers and evil things that make our Christianity a nullity and are too often a reproach to those around us. As a community we must shake off the venomous beasts whose poison not only repels others but kills and enfeebles us. The vipers of Toronto are different from those in Montreal or New York yet they may in some way not be unlike our own here in Kincardine and the Bruce.

In nearly every community across the country, people are calling upon governments and leaders to establish business revival, employment and investment opportunities. Growth and rebirth in the business community is desirable. But talk about getting a revival in God's business, there are many who will simply shake their heads. They don't know about it or they are afraid it won't work. There is a strange inconsistency: a thing is all right for personal concerns but all wrong in God's. In my mind the two are not at all different. God's work, like ours has stages of activity and the Christian should work just as hard as the merchant or trades-person, earnestly seeking for a revival in trade. Let us roll away this stone of unbelief and indifference and we will soon hear a voice from the place of the stone crying, *Lazarus, come out!* Let us cry out as earnestly for revival in our faith as in any other walk of life or business.

I invite you to consider three stones that need to be rolled away from our caves before the dead Lazarus within us can come out. The first stone to be rolled away we have already talked about, the *Stone of Unbelief*. Unbelief causes the church to go downhill. We need to revive our faith and truly believe that with God all things are possible. Just because it didn't work last year or ten years ago does not limit us to a predetermined condition that things cannot change or get better; that lives cannot be touched or changed; that souls cannot be won for Christ and His kingdom come. It is not always the big noise that does the moving but the steady and quiet witness that others may be able to see. Our prayers must be that God will strike down our unbelief.

Another terrible stone that needs to be rolled away is, the *Stone of Prejudice*. We see and hear prejudice in so many ways. There are the likes and dislikes about the various denominations. There are strong opinions about how the worship should or should not be conducted. The same is said for evangelism and the work in the church. Revivals happen in nearly all aspects of life, business, education, sports etc. Look how excited many people got when the Attack in Owen Sound or the Blue Jays started winning. Revivals are a necessary part of the political ups and downs as well as trade and relationships between businesses, countries and people.

How too often we hear the statement or response, *It's not worth the effort!* When Philip went to Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus, Nathaniel objected: *Could any good thing come out of Nazareth?* He answered simply, *Come and see!* So I invite you to consider coming in faith, and see. Martha had faith in Jesus and she was able to see Lazarus come

alive. When God's people come alive, the movement can be a mighty engine in reaching souls. Under its direction there was a time when 3,000 were added to the Church in just one day. If we believe the Scripture, why can we not believe God's power is available and present to work in and through us, here and now in this place and in this congregation?

The third stone is, the *Stone of the Sectarian Spirit*. This spirit once held a despotic grip on many church people of all backgrounds. When I was a boy Baptists thought we Presbyterians were sinners; we Presbyterians thought Catholics were evil because of the Pope. As a young person I heard many statements that were a slur noting a person's religious choice as to if they were Pentecostal or Mormons etc. Many efforts at the beginning of the ecumenical movement failed because they ended up with condescension which often killed the project. The *Sectarian Stone* is a real stone even though it is nothing like the boulder it once was. The rolling away process must be pushed vigorously so we may heave it away altogether. In Northern Ontario many communities have come to the conclusion that they cannot keep 5 – 7 churches open for the handful of people who still live there. There is a new spirit of cooperation between many of the mainline and even some non denominational groups. Think of Jesus' ministry. When He came into the world if He had allied with the Sadducees, they would have warmly upheld Him. If he had joined the Pharisees, they would not have allowed Him to be crucified. Jesus was not exclusive and I believe He wants us to be one brother/sisterhood, one faith and one spirit – Christians. There are many exciting stories in the OT. I like the one about Eldad and Medad who took on priestly duties without permission. Joshua became excited at the irregularity in the temple and ran and told the scandal to Moses. It was the same with Jesus, when the word was told by over excited disciples that men were casting out devils who were "not one of us," Jesus did not rebuke those people. *Those who do not speak against us are for us.* We need to pray for the differences that exist within our own church and community; pray that the Spirit of God may come in and give us one spirit to glorify his Holy name.

Following Jesus often has its challenges to all of us as individuals and as community, but the Blessings will be eternal. Amen