

“Let Us Live in the Sunlight”

Prelude: Today’s Gospel lesson is a story about a miraculous resuscitation of a widow’s only son, who has died. The story follows another healing of a centurion’s slave that takes place in the first eleven verses of chapter 7. In that first story, Jesus is revealed as having power over disease. The story takes place in Capernaum and begins with the words: “After Jesus had finished all his sayings ...” What is revealed in that story is that Jesus’ authority is something more than the speaking of wise sayings. The centurion affirms this by saying to Jesus, “... only speak the word, and let my servant be healed” (7:7). And it was so ... Jesus spoke the word ... the servant was healed.

Today’s Gospel lesson follows the same theme of Jesus’ miraculous power, but escalates both the drama and the revelation of God’s capacity to work through him. In this story, a man is not ill; he has died. The people of the town of Nain are in the process of burying him when Jesus and a large crowd of followers come upon him. Jesus has left Capernaum on a trip to Jerusalem when he passes through the town.

The situation of a funeral might have been cause for Jesus and his followers to give wide birth and pass by. At this point, it would seem that there was nothing that even a prophet like Jesus could do. It would have made sense for him to stand aside and keep a respectful, but also “ritually pure distance” from the passing corpse. However, something moves Jesus deeply. The young dead man was the only son of a widow. Jesus’ compassion was for something more than a passing corpse. It was for the living. For in losing her son, the widow had also lost her income. He was her only bread winner. Jesus is aware of this bigger picture and thus, responds from an overwhelming sense of compassion for the whole family. In fact, the son’s life is restored, and so is his mother’s life. She is restored to a place in the economic community. Here now the word of God: **READ LUKE 7:11-17**

Message: One of the most avoided topics of discussion in our society is death. Though it occurs to every living person, we are very good at avoiding the subject and isolating ourselves from it. In an earlier age, death was understood to be a natural part of life and society dealt with it in practical ways and with common sense. People were allowed to die at home. After death, they were not sent off to a mortuary, but kept home in bed or placed on the dining room table. At home they were prepared for visitation and burial. Once the bed and table had been vacated, they were put back into service for the living.

People in less modernized cultures still deal with death the way we use to in this country. We see it all the time on TV when a dead person is simply wrapped in a sheet or cloth and carried on a stretcher and placed directly into a grave without coffin or vault. Today, for the most part, death is kept at a distance. It usually occurs in isolated places where only specialists have to deal with it, though with the help of Hospice organizations, we are doing better. Afterwards, when families prepare to make arrangements, more specialists step in to maintain a margin of insulation around the grieving. Most of us don’t hang out with the “death professional” like undertakers, morticians, funeral directors. They make us nervous and remind us of sad times.

In Jesus’ day, death was not so distant. The death rate in his day was no different than in ours: 100% of all people born eventually died. But, there were no professionals on hand to deal with death and burial. The body would be prepared for burial by the women. For Jesus and his large crowd of followers to encounter a funeral procession while traveling through the town of Nain would not have been in any way out of the ordinary. That Jesus would have had compassion on the mother of the dead man was also to be expected. She was a widow, and with the death of her son came the loss of income and all hope for future security. What certainly was unusual was what Jesus did when he approached the funeral bier, that frame upon which the corpse laid.

Jesus spoke, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” Immediately, the dead man was filled with new life. He sat up and spoke. That was not something anyone had seen happen before --- nor have we since, despite the stories to the contrary that come out of Hollywood. This episode in Luke forces us to think about death for a change. Most of the time, we can relegate death to the specialists and deal with it only as it becomes necessary. But, it is useful for people of faith to have a better relationship with things relating to death. This is true, in part, because the more familiar we are with something, the less fearful of it we become. But it is also true because faith is essentially about living and dying. Life and death are inseparable. Denial of that fact is the enemy both of mental health and mature faith.

Jesus confronts death. In this story, he does not stop to worry about issues of ritual uncleanness. His compassion is stronger than religious piety. Jesus' compassion grows out of his concern for a woman whose social security program is being carried on a funeral bier. More than an only son has died. Her own life is now in a desperate situation. The natural order of things was for the woman to give birth to a son who would care for her in her old age. When she died, then his children would take care of him when he was too old to earn an income. The natural order of things was suspended in this story. Jesus' compassion is inspired by the thought the mothers should not have to bury their sons, but sons should bury their mothers. It was this imbalance that was altered by Jesus' entering the situation and loosening the grip that death had on this family.

Stories of children dying before their parents are also common in our age. The natural order of things used to allow for that to happen. Johann Sebastian Bach had 20 children by two wives. Only ten survived to adulthood. "What nature took away in the form of untimely death, nature made accommodation for by the fruitfulness of human union." Today, we know how to have fewer children, and we plan to do so because most of them live. Still, tragedies occur which I can testify to over the tenure of my pastorate.

What does the story of Jesus raising the man from Nain have to tell us about death upsetting the natural order of things? And, what does the story have to tell us about God's relationship to the living? This story, like one in I Kings 17, points us to a powerful message of good news. Not only does the Gospel lesson make us confront the issue of death, it also engages us in the consideration of life. The message of grace in both today's lessons is that God is ultimately not interested in death. God is interested in bringing life and new life to God's people. Giving life is the first, most important work that God does. It is, as Martin Luther puts it, God's "proper work."

God first breathed the breath of life into creation. God breathed into Adam the first breath of human life. And God breathed the Holy Spirit into the church at Pentecost. In the same manner, Jesus breathed new life into this young man of Nain by speaking the words, "Young man, I say to you, arise." The story indicates that bringing life is what Jesus is about. He does not ignore death, or seek insulation from it. He does not let the funeral procession pass by or demonstrate concerns about being among the unclean. Jesus sees death as the force contrary to God's will and acts to overcome it. In the end, Jesus' whole life will be about *that* one thing ... overcoming the power of death and bringing new life. Jesus restores the natural order of things. He restores the power of life over death, and the power of God over everything else in all creation.

The God we worship is a God of life ... is the Holy One triumphant over death. Some of the great people of faith have given a proper witness at the moment of their death and have demonstrated to us the importance of how believers ought to die. A prison doctor described Bonhoeffer's death this way:

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

I conclude today's message by praying the prayer inserted in your bulletin:
God of Life, you conceive of us even before our parents know of our existence. You knit us together in our mother's womb and fill us with life and possibility. When we are born, you give us days to live, people to love, work to do, and the opportunity to become what you have dreamed us to be. Yet through all the days of our lives, there is a shadow that hangs over us. Though we may be filled with breath, we know that one day it will be extinguished. Even though we understand death to be a part of life, O God, we fear it and do all we can to avoid it. Take away, loving God, our fear of dealing with death. Help us to see in death a natural completion and transition. And, help us to believe what you teach: that you are the God of life ... that you love to bring new and everlasting breath to all who die in faith. Let us live in the sunlight of your love and fear not the shadow of death. We pray in the name of the One who brings new life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.