

“Are You Alive?”

Luke 7:11-17, Proper 5-C, Pentecost 3, June 5, 2016

One of the things that continues to surprise me as I go into a number of different hospitals—here in the greater metropolitan city of Columbia—is how many people there still are living in our great Palmetto State who have never taken time to learn proper “Elevator Etiquette.”

Everyone should know by now, shouldn't they?—that when the doors of the elevator open—that those who are eager to enter the elevator should still wait long enough for those who are aboard that elevator—to exit it, before they attempt to enter it—but such is not always the case!

Nor will I ever forget taking a Driver's Education Course way back in 1972 when I was in the 11th grade at Mainland High School in Daytona Beach, Florida. The instructor told us—that if you are ever driving through South Carolina and a funeral procession is coming toward you—that you'd better be sure and pull over to the side of the road—to honor that funeral procession—for if you don't, and an officer of the law is there—that you will be ticketed for sure!

Though I've been told by more than a few funeral directors that that law has, for quite some time now, been repealed!

Brothers and sisters, when Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd of people, who were following him were getting ready to enter that little town of Nain, about 25 miles south of in Capernaum, where Jesus had been most recently preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God and healing many people---St. Luke tells us that there was a large funeral procession coming directly towards them. That funeral procession was exiting Nain, because it was illegal for any burials of the dead to take place within the city walls.

I wonder if Jesus and his disciples were willing to step aside and to allow the funeral procession to exit the town of Nain, first, you know, like those people who are hoping to enter an elevator but are willing to allow those aboard that elevator to exit first?

Though Jesus, his disciples and that large crowd of people that were following him may have stepped aside first, Jesus still broke proper protocol when he interrupted that funeral procession as the Holy Son of God who had been born into this world to INTERRUPT DEATH; TO INTERRUPT DEATH NOT ONLY FOR THAT POOR WIDOW, WHOSE ONLY SON HAD DIED, BUT ALSO FOR YOU AND ME AND FOR ALL OTHER PEOPLE AS WELL!

(1) St. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw this woman: “He had compassion on her and he said to her, “Do not weep!” (V. 11).

The verb here, “to have compassion” in the Greek text, signifies a deep-emotional feeling that had now completely overcome our Lord, that most literally translated into English would signify for us that Jesus had a very “gut wrenching” reaction to what he witnessed there that day!

Lots of people were following along in that funeral procession; at least for one reason, if not for two reasons. The first reason would have been that the townspeople of Nain was not unlike some of the townspeople in some of our small towns in South Carolina still today! In these small towns, everybody knows most everybody else who is living in the town too—not only knows them because of having frequently seen their faces, but also because they have actually taken time to get to know one another.

Still today, in small towns all across America, people turn out large numbers to support one another at a time like this!

Secondly, there could have been a large group of people there, because oftentimes, if people could afford it, they would hire PROFESSIONAL MOURNERS—SOME WHO WOULD PLAY THEIR FLUTES AND CYMBALS...AND OTHERS OF WHOM WOULD OFFER UP THEIR LOUD PIERCING CRIES, THEIR DEEP

SHRILLS THAT WERE ESPECIALLY DESIGNED TO BRING MORE AND MORE PEOPLE TO TEARS OUT OF RESPECT FOR THE ONE WHO HAD DIED AND FOR THEIR SURVIVING RELATIVES!

(2) BUT JESUS DID NOT KNOW THAT THAT THIS MAN WHO HAD DIED WAS THIS WOMAN'S ONLY SON, NOR THAT SHE WAS A WIDOW, SIMPLY BECAUSE HE HAD READ THAT INFORMATION EARLIER THAT MORNING IN THE OBITUARY SECTION OF THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER!

No, Jesus knew that because Jesus knows everything. As a matter of fact, St. John tells us that no one ever had to tell Jesus what it was --- that was in the heart and the mind of another person, because all our Lord had to do, was to look there and see.

No one had to tell Jesus that that woman who had been caught in the act of adultery one day was deeply repentant BECAUSE OF her sin, because he could simply look there and see (John 8:1-12). Similarly, Jesus could look into the heart of this grieving widow and see that she was in DEEP ANGUISH and experiencing a profound sense of loss and pain.

(3) Jesus interrupted this funeral procession because Jesus had come into our world to interrupt death—not only for this woman—not only for Mary and Martha of Bethany when their brother Lazarus had died—but also for every one of us!

This is the Gospel message, pure and simple! *“God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might have eternal life through him” (John 3:16-17)!*

Brothers and sisters there is so much that I could share with you about this sermon text this morning but I want to limit my comments to three more observations.

(A). Please note that unlike the previous miracle account that we read last Sunday, verses 1-10 of Luke chapter 7, that Jesus intercedes on behalf of this dear lady, not because she has friends inviting him to do so for her --- the way that Roman centurion did we heard about last week. Nor does Jesus intercede on behalf of this dear lady because—she had done something that alerted him to the fact that she was blessed with an especially strong faith!

You remember the story last week. A Roman centurion, a Gentile, had a servant whom he valued highly who died and he was well aware of the fact that Jesus had the power to heal people. He didn't send two or three of his soldiers to wherever it was that Jesus was at and command Jesus to come back...to heal his servant. No, this Roman centurion who had struck up quite a friendship with some of the elders who were attendants at the local synagogue—he went to them and requested that they go to Jesus and seek help For his servant on his behalf.

Which they did and they did gladly—saying to Jesus, “He is worthy to have you do this for him because he loves our nation and built our synagogue!”

Jesus goes towards the Centurion's house. But along the way he is interrupted with other messengers saying, *“Lord do not trouble yourself to come underneath my roof! Just say the word from wherever it is that you are at and my servant will be healed!”*

Jesus commends this man, a Gentile, for his faith. *“Never among the Jewish people have I ever encountered anyone with as much faith in God and in me as this man has!”* Jesus was amazed at his faith.

But we see none of this here! What we see is the unconditional love of God in action! We don't know what this woman's spiritual state was! But there are some mighty correlations aren't there between this account in our Gospel lesson and the story of Elijah and his dealings with the widow of Zarahath in our Old Testament lesson today!

In the Gospel lesson Jesus simply speaks the WORD and the deceased man is filled with new life and he sits up and begins to speak. Elijah, is far more dramatic. He goes upstairs and stretches his body out over the body of this widow's (also) only-son, and prays and God fills that boy with new life! Both of these women were in dire straits. Both of these women would have had their lives, it seems, cut immensely short, had God not intervened!

(B) ELIJAH STRETCHES HIS BODY OUT OVER THE DEAD BODY OF THE WIDOW'S ONLY SON...SO AS TO SHARE THE LIFE OF GOD THAT WAS WITHIN HIM...INTO THE LIFE OF THIS LIFELESS SON.

And so Jesus spreads his life out upon that old rugged cross to fill us with new life too. *"He died that we who live might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised again on our behalf!" (2 Cor. 5:1-21).*

(C) Let's also note that there must have been a large part of this woman that died, even as there was a large part of the widow of Zaraphath who died when their sons died. There were two funerals really taking place that day...the son of the widow of Nain, but also the widow herself had now died to a large degree!

Jesus came and lived the perfect life he died among us, and died on the cross to reconcile us to his Heavenly Father—that he might breathe new life in us—as we make our way through this journey called life. Yes, the psalmist says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me! Your rod and staff they comfort me!"* But the psalmist is not just talking about when we are facing our own death, but when we are walking through that valley with a loved one too! YES, THERE IS LIFE AFTER DEATH; NOT ONLY FOR THE ONE WHO HAS DIED BUT FOR THOSE OF US LEFT BEHIND WHO ARE MOURNING THE LOSS OF THE ONE WHO HAS DIED.

There is new life available to us through the cross and empty tomb, when we are grieving and severely mourning the death of relationships that have died. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Peter writes, *"Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by his great mercy, we have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and become heirs of an inheritance that is undefiled and unfading, and imperishable, kept in heaven for us by God's power ready to be revealed to us at the end of time" (1 Peter 1:1-3)!*

If you ask most Christians who Jesus raised to life, the most common response you would get would be "Lazarus." How could we miss the story of the raising of the brother of Mary and Martha? The three days in the tomb caused the sisters to warn Jesus that Lazarus would "stinketh."

What a great word, "stinketh"! It sounds like something you would say about a high school locker room after a big basketball game. The resurrection story found in the chapter 11 of the Gospel of John is THE story that springs to mind when we talk about the incredible power of Jesus even over our last enemy that Paul names as death (1 Cor. 15).

But here in chapter 7 of Luke, we have another miraculous resurrection of an individual without much fanfare or comment: a miracle that ranks right up there with walking on water and bringing sight to the blind, but which gets less than exciting press coverage. I have a feeling that we tend to leave it alone because we get embarrassed by it.

There is nothing being done by anyone to seek this great blessing from God. It comes to us completely unasked for by us. And isn't this always the case, when it comes to that OLD OLD STORY OF JESUS AND HIS LOVE?

The hymn writer says: "Chief of sinners through I be, Jesus shed his blood for me, died that I might never die, lives that I might live on high, as the branch is to the Vine, I am his and he is mine!"

Oh the height of Jesus' love—higher than the heavens above. Deeper than the depths of see, lasting for eternity. Love that found me, wondrous thought! Found me when I sought him not!"

In the words of this Gospel lesson this morning, the people proclaim that there truly was a prophet in their midst. Jesus was repeating history that proved that God was in the process of saving God's his holy people.

Secondly, we see Jesus comforting a widow at the death of her son. He stops her weeping and returns her son to the land of the living.

Shades of Easter! There will be another widow who will see her Son die, only to have her tears of sorrow replaced with tears of joy at the words on an early Sunday morning that declaration: HE IS NOT HERE. HE IS RISEN! Again, we see the echo of another story resounding in the first.

We see a Jesus moved by compassion for someone in the deepest pain. Jesus is moved by this grieving widow and her sorrow at the loss of her son.

In his Good Shepherd discourse Jesus says: "*I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly!*" (John 10:10) Jesus has come to reverse the great peril that came to the human race when our first parents ate of the fruit of that forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden: The tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. That tree has been replaced for us now by the tree of the cross!

For years leading up to the 15th Century we are told that there were signs posted all along the western shores of Portugal that stated in Latin: "Non plura est!" which means: "There is nothing beyond this point!"

That's what most Europeans believed...but all that changed when in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue and discovered there was a whole new world waiting out there for us beyond the continent of Europe.

Many people believe that the hour of their physical death ends everything. But not so... "For as it Adam all die, even so through Christ shall all be made alive! He is but the first fruits of them that have fallen asleep" (I Cor. 15).

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his holy name! Amen