

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 7:11–17

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The younger the person, the greater the crowd at the funeral. It's almost a hard and fast rule. When the young die, there is a heightened sense of outrage and grief. There is no "life well lived," no litany of life achievements, no triumphal obituaries, no sense of "mission accomplished" at the end of a long life or "I did it my way" swagger. There is only a sense of tragedy, hopelessness, despair, unfairness. Where was God to help? Why did God let this happen? When the young person is the only son of a widowed mother, the tragedy is squared. He was her only son, the joy of her life, all that she had left, her only source of support. And now he was dead and she had to do what no mother wants to do. Bury her child. The grief was as great as the crowd that had gathered.

Into this grief and pain and loss comes Jesus. He'd come from Capernaum. He was just approaching the edge of town when he encounters the funeral procession. He looks the grieving mother and widow in the eye. His heart goes out to her. He had compassion. He felt her pain as His own, deeply. He says what so many of us have said in similar circumstances, "Don't weep."

Ordinarily, those words would be hollow words. Of course, there should be weeping! Don't do what Jesus does here and tell someone who just lost her only son not to weep. She must weep, and we must weep with her. But He is the Lord, and His Word is much more than a pious sentiment. "Do not weep" means "I'm going to do something for you that you would never dare to ask or believe." "Do not weep, because I am here, and I am the resurrection and the life." "Do not weep, because death is nothing more than a peaceful sleep to me, and with a Word I can wake him up." "Do not weep, because I, Jesus, am with you."

What did she think at that moment? Who was this man telling her not to weep in her grief? Was she indignant? Outraged? Confused? All of the above? What did Jesus mean by telling her "Don't cry" when weeping was all the comfort that she had? She'd buried her husband and now she was burying their only son. What else could she do but weep?

But with Jesus, the words “Do not weep” are a prelude to something more. He speaks; He acts. He stops the funeral procession in its tracks. He reaches out and touches the open coffin. He reaches out as though reaching into the grave. The pall bearers stop in their tracks. The mourners are silent. Everyone is watching. “Young man, I say to you, arise.” It’s as though Jesus were waking someone up from an afternoon nap. That’s what death is to Jesus. Nothing more than a kind of sleep from which we are awakened. And just like the wind, the waves, the demons, the diseases, death must obey the Word of the Lord. The dead man sat up in his own coffin and began to speak. We don’t know what he said, and we don’t need to know. We need to know that he was alive again. The funeral was over. There would be no burial that day. A widow’s sorrow had turned to joy, her weeping into gladness. “Jesus gave him back to his mother.”

This was the first of the dead Jesus raised. There would be Jairus’ daughter and his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. But this widow’s son was the first. It ups the ante with Jesus. Demons and diseases are one thing. Raising the dead is a whole new level of sign and meaning. It wasn’t lost on the crowd. A great fear and awe came over the crowd and they praised God for what they’d seen. “God has come to help His people.” “A great prophet has appeared among us.” That and more. Much more. More than they could have known or anticipated. The Son of God, the creative Word, the Life and Light of all, had come to deal once and for all with our last and greatest enemy: Death. And Jesus made it look as easy as healing Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever or the centurion’s servant from last week’s Gospel. Just a word from Jesus to a corpse, “arise,” and the dead sit up alive and speaking.

It’s a great story of hope, of life, of resurrection and reunion. And yet you have to stop and wonder a bit. How many other grieving widows were there in Israel? How many grieving parents were burying their son or daughter? And not just in Israel, but also in the rest of the world? The question arises whenever someone receives a miracle from God and others don’t. Like when your neighborhood is on fire and your house is spared. Many years ago in the Piedmont fire in northern CA, in a neighborhood I know well from my Berkeley days, a single house stood unsinged amidst all the smoldering debris and ruined homes. On the rooftop of that house were the words, “Thank you, Jesus!” And you can understand that sentiment, if your house was spared. Just as, I’m sure, the widow thanked Jesus for giving her son back to her alive. Thank you, Jesus indeed.

But what about the neighbors? What if you were a neighbor to that house? Do you thank Jesus for sparing the house next door and reducing your house to cinders? Maybe. Depends on the mortgage, I suppose. Or the people of one city who thank God that the hurricane spared their town and flattened the neighboring town instead. You see, there is something about the specific, singular miracle that sits oddly with us when it's out of context. You start to wonder, why that widow in Nain? Why not all widows in Israel? Or in the world, for that matter? Why that one young man? Why not every young man who died too soon? Why not all the dead? Was that woman more worthy of a miracle? There is no record of her praying, of her sending for Jesus, of her faith or her son's faith or anyone's faith. No one expected anything of Jesus that day. He just showed up unannounced and gave the widow her dead son back alive without so much as a syllable of conversation. Without any merit or worthiness in her, as we might say in the Lutheran way.

So is that how it works, that God just randomly doles out favors where and when it pleases Him? So one widow in Nain gets a spectacular miracle, and the rest have to deal with a burial and their grief? And what about ours?

We need to see this miracle in its context, as a preview of what Jesus was going to do once for all. This is a preview of the coming attraction, when Jesus would draw all to Himself in His death and conquer the grave for everyone. In effect, Jesus was swapping places with the young man. In saying, "Young man, arise," Jesus is saying, "Young man, though you are dead, rise up and live. I am your life and I will take up your death. You go back to your mother, and I will leave my mother at the foot of the cross in the care of my disciple. You go to your life, and I go to your death. I become your Sin, I take your place under the Law, I bear the burden of your death."

What Jesus did for the one woman on the road out of Nain, He does for all in His own suffering and death. That's where this solitary miracle has its universal meaning and significance. Jesus came to conquer death and raise the dead, to reunite humanity in His resurrection, to give sons back to their mothers and daughters to their fathers, to break the bonds that hold us captive to the grave. He comes to raise each of us, to say to us as He did to that young man, "Arise, get up, and live." He comes to each of us in our times of mourning, grief, and despair, and gives us back our loves and our lives.

He comes to interrupt humanity's funeral procession with all its flowers and fakery and Forest Lawns and Rose Hills and pretty caskets and fake grass at graveside and puts His final word on

death. “Arise. Get up. Wake up, sleeper. Your night of death is ended, the morning has come. The Easter alarm has sounded. Christ has risen from the dead.”

A little boy stood beside the coffin of his grandmother, whom he loved dearly. Everyone was crying, including Mommy and Daddy, but this little boy wasn't crying. He knew what to do. He remembered what he'd heard in Sunday school, about how Jesus told the widow's son to get up and he did. So he did that with Grandma. He went up to the casket, reached out his hand to touch Grandma, and prayed, “Dear Jesus, make her sit up, just like you did with that boy.” He did it several times, and nothing happened. He began to cry. His mother gently led him away from the casket. “That's the day I lost my faith in Jesus,” said the young man who was that little boy.

He didn't realize something or understand it. Those prayers were heard. And answered. Jesus had embraced Grandma (and him and you) in the darkness of His death on the cross. And He raised Grandma to life in Him in His resurrection. And seated her (and you) with Him at the right hand of God in glory. The answer to that little boy's prayer will be seen soon enough on the Last Day when Grandma does sit up when Jesus appears to raise the dead. She will sit up, as we all will sit up and praise forever.

But for now, it's faith, trust. It's that quiet moment when Jesus stopped a funeral procession and looked into a weeping widow's eyes and said, “Don't cry. It will be all right. Trust me.”

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Luke 7:11-17 / 5 June 2016”, posted 2016-06-13 (<https://htlcms.org/2016/06/luke-711-17-5-june-2016-2/>).