**Luke 7:11-15** June 30, 2019

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*Luke 7:11Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 12As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. 13When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” 14Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” 15The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**When the Lord of Life Encountered Death…**

You see them on the road coming toward you. A line of vehicles moving slowly, lights on. No, not a convoy of military vehicles. As they reach you, you suddenly realize what it is: it’s a funeral procession. It catches you by surprise, you were lost in thoughts about the money situation at home, and your plans for this evening. The farthest thing from your mind was death. Hitting the brakes you swerve off onto the shoulder of the road and come to a halt.

Not everybody does this. A couple other cars zoom by. But you know that at least around these parts, part of being a respectful citizen is stopping when a funeral procession rolls by.

You’re not even sure why you do it. That’s ok. I really couldn’t have told you either until I sat there thinking about it this last week. I could only have give some vague answer about “paying last respects” which is really an empty phrase for doing something we know other people expect us to do, but really have no idea why we do it. Why do we stop the car? I have never known the deceased. Many, most, maybe all of the people in the procession are strangers to me. What does it help? It certainly isn’t going to bring anybody back. I wouldn’t ask strangers to stop for me. And besides all that, isn’t it kind of dangerous to have people all of a sudden, almost randomly pulling off the road?

I don’t think pulling over is just “paying respect.” I think it is something deeper. That comes from a desire to somehow show the living, even if we have never met them, our support in their time of sorrow and trouble. We want to help lift their load, somehow.

In the olden days when a someone passed away, it required a lot of people to pitch in and help. People could take all of the emotion that they felt for the deceased and the survivors and turn it into something meaningful. Someone had to construct the coffin, dig the grave, cook meals for the grave diggers and coffin makers and all the immediate family. In the old days people would just plain take a large chunk of the day to be with the bereaved. It was a community affair. Those days are long gone.

We have become so efficient that all of the opporutunities to serve the bereaved have been farmed out. No one has to be inconvenienced. We can just stop by the funeral home for ten minutes after work. And now those ten minutes are getting to be too much and we are getting rid of visitations and even funerals altogether. “No need to trouble yourself. It’s all taken care of, thank you very much.” Nothing to be done, just awkward words mixed in with some good memories. So we have been relegated to standing by the side of the road saying, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know…” We’ve lost something.

But this widow, here, still had the old ways on her side. If she were the ordinary citizen of the ancient world, she was well-known to the people of her small town, having lived there her entire life, or at least entire adult life. Everyone in town knew her by sight if not by name. They had known her husband before his death, and they had known her only child and known that he was her only child. When that boy had died, everyone in Nain knew the whole story. So it is that this woman without a family member remaining, still walked out to bury her son and ***“a large crowd from the town was with her.”***

While the people of Nain had been making the funeral preparations, another crowd was crossing the lush plains of Jezreel at the feet of Nain. This crowd had a very different mood. All was alive to them. Spring-time flowers covered the fields. On the previous day up in Capernaum they had witnessed Jesus miraculously heal a centurion’s servant, without ever touching him, without even seeing him. Remember that? Now they followed wondering what would happen next in this great man’s prescence.

Their springtime exubberance hushed as they neared Nain. On the low part of the hillside they saw a procession, a crowd, and they knew what it was all about. In the distance they could see the open coffin carried by half a dozen young men. They could hear the loud mourning of the women. Jesus’ crowd knew the Jewish tradition that to not follow the dead to his last resting place was to hold in contempt the Creator.[[1]](#endnote-1) They knew they could not simply walk by, thinking, “Never knew him. None of my business. Let’s move on.” They would have to, in some way pay their respects.

**A. …His Heart Was Touched**

Jesus led them by his own example. He walked right into the funeral procession . He found the now childless widow. Her sorrow, her abject sorrow worked on his heart. Jesus’ own crowd nodded somber agreement. How right that this prophet—not like their self-righteous Pharisees with their self-centered respect for the Law of Moses (a point which we do not have time to go in to here) who would stay far from death—no, this Prophet went to the widow, himself showing concern and compassion in his own face. “Yes,” everyone thought, “this is what a man of God should do!” ***“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her.”***

Jesus didn’t shrug his shoulders over another of the many sad stories that filled the land. Jesus didn’t say with a twinkle in his eye, “Now watch this!” No, ***“his heart went out to her.”*** He, the Son of God, felt the sorrow she felt.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell us of three people whom Jesus raised from the dead. Of these three, what stands out in *this* event of the three is Jesus’ emotional reaction. He came into contact with death in the normal course of affairs, almost accidentally. Yet he is stricken by the moment and feels compassion. Yes, God does see. Yes, God feels!

He knows what the death of this child meant to this woman. Let me explore that for a moment because we in our society cannot undersand. Go to a subsistence culture, where everyone is living hand to mouth, where your safety net is your family. There is no government program to bail you out. No, food stamps. No social security. No senior living centers. Part of why you have children—which sounds selfish to the jaded sensibilities of prosperous people—part of why you have children in a subsistence culture is that in your later years you don’t end up destitute, forsaken, starving.

I remember visiting Jim in an African village called Hamaundu. His family had moved to the area decades ago. Over the years all his siblings had died. Finally his last nephew in the area passed away. Now sixty, legally blind, missing some toes on one of his feet, he had only an 8’ across grass hut built by the members of the Lutheran church. His hut didn’t even have a door, just a doorway. He ate once a day, fed meagerly by neighbors with children of their own, who really didn’t have food for the extra mouth. That was what waited for this woman, and Jesus knew it.

Jesus did many miracles, but you cannot help but notice what sets this apart from others: Christ’s compassion. Stop thinking, for a moment about the end of this story! Think about what this sentence in the middle means: ***“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her.”***

It is the same compassion that caused the second person of the Trinity to take on human flesh, to become one of us. God looked from heaven and saw a planet full of people who stubbornly refuse to listen; who always look for ways to get what *they* want instead of what God wants. By their own disobedience and sin they/we consistently choose death over God. Then we complain how unfair it is that our rebellion brings us misery on earth, that surely God must not be a loving God.

God is a holy God, and in nothing that we suffer in this life can we say, “I didn’t deserve that” to God. We can say that about what other people do to us perhaps, but not about God. If the wages of sin is death – and that was God’s warning even before we chose sin, then what do our many sins deserve?

God looked down on people like that and ***“his heart went out to them.”*** Jesus became one of us. He did not stand far off watching us get our just desserts, but he jumped into our story as the most important character of all. He suffered the sorrows and indignities of this world that we must suffer. More than that, he suffered the death, the abandonment by God that our own anti-God choices deserve. That’s what saved us.

This reading also speaks to us now. It assures us that God knows our troubles and is touched by them. Jesus did not walk into this funeral procession, knowing what he would soon do and tell everyone to cheer up. No. He understood. ***“His heart went out to her.”***

That gives us hope when we most need it. When you pray in the bitterness of spirit about the tragedies of your life: the relationships that are fraying, the job that is demanding too much, the financial obligations that seem destined to end in ruin, pray! Pray and know that Jesus Christ knows. He walked this earth. He saw someone just like you. And he had compassion on that person. Pour out your heart to him.

**B. …He Proved Himself Death’s Master**

Jesus’ heart went out to her, and then Jesus did the unforgiveable. He told this woman, ***“Don’t cry.”*** But her boy’s corpse is right there, on the palette carried on the shoulders of those young men! From where she is standing she can see the face so beloved, and not just beloved, but her only hope for life—“Don’t cry?” How could she not?

When Jesus said, “Don’t cry” to this woman, he was not rebuking all whose sorrow turns to tears. Some people think that. Some well-meaning Christians even say that at funerals. But Jesus said “Don’t cry” in a way we never can. “Don’t cry!” was a promise. ***“Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.”***

Jesus wrenched this young man out of Death’s embrace. Jesus simply commanded, ***“I say to you, get up!”*** In our first reading today, Elijah had to cry out to the Lord, and three times! But Jesus issues the command on his own authority, and life returns.

While this young man returned to life only for a short time, what Jesus proves to us that the Lord of Life is the Master of death. He shows us that he does have the power to return life to the dead body. He proves that he has the right to say, as he said in John chapter 11, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* Therefore we may mourn for the day, but we do not *“grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”* (1 Th. 4:13)

When the procession of death had marched out of the town of Nain that day, it encountered the procession of the Lord of Life. As the crowd following Jesus quieted out of repsect for the funeral procession, it looked like again Death had won. Even as Jesus looked at the woman with the compassion and concern etched into his own face, it seemed that Jesus himself must acquiesce and concede the victory. His concern for that woman in that time morphed into a concern for all people of all time, and he showed at the gates of a small town called Nain, that even death will one day submit completely to the Lord of Life. Amen.

1. These points of Jewish funeral customs, and many more, can be found in Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 382-384. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)