

Sermon on Luke 7:11-17
2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 6, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ....

If you have ever been part of a funeral procession from the church to the gravesite, you know that in Minnesota, and probably across the Lutheran Church and Western Civilization in general, funeral processions are a somber, serious affair. From the days when mourners and worshippers left the church building to go outside into the church cemetery to bury the deceased's body, likely the only sounds one might hear are singers singing a hymn, the minister saying the prayers, and perhaps a quiet, whispered comment or two. There is usually a quiet hush when we "western Christians" take a body outside for burial.

Even less noise is heard in a procession to cemeteries that are driving distance from the church. Once the family and their friends enter their cars, not a sound is heard except for the sound of traffic. A family might have a little conversation within their vehicle, but to the people outside, no human sound is heard as the procession drives by on their way to the cemetery. Even when there are over 400 cars, like in a state funeral, there is a somber and respectful "hush". Two weeks ago, when Sgt. Joseph Bergeron, a Maplewood police officer killed in the line of duty, was buried, hundreds of police cars drove a route from the St. Paul Cathedral across St. Paul and through Maplewood to the St. John's Church cemetery in Little Canada. Along the route hundreds of people stood by the side of the road to catch a glimpse and pay their respects. Some saluted, some waved flags, others simply stood in silent vigil. Hardly a sound was heard. I stood at the corner by my house at the tail end of the procession to watch, and was impressed with the silent speed by which the police vehicles sped by.

Not so in other parts of the world. Middle Eastern funeral processions are well known for the noise that the mourners make as they walk together through town to the place of burial. In some societies there are even "professional mourners" – persons who are paid a small stipend to sing chants or wail their mournful cries on behalf of the family of the deceased. It may sound strange to our ears, but it is common to their cultures. In Chinese culture it is customary for a widow to cry out loudly at the burial of her husband as a way to show her grief and love; not to do so would seem to show a lack of care or grief. And if you have ever heard a funeral procession in New Orleans walk by for the funeral of a musician, you know that the drums, trumpets, saxophones and other instruments play loudly and cymbals crash – the dead do not go quietly unnoticed as they might in other places.

So the funeral procession described in the gospel of Luke today must have been a noisy affair, for that was the custom. A young man had died tragically, leaving his widowed mother alone with no male of means to support her, which made it a double tragedy. Perhaps there were relatives of the woman in the procession, who were joined by neighbors and all the folks in the town of Nain for this procession to bury the young man, carried on a funeral bier by his neighbors and friends. Anyone watching the procession must have been moved by the mournful cries of the crowd passing by, knowing how much suffering this poor woman must face in the future, because of her lack of means.

But as the funeral procession neared the town gate, yet another procession approached, even larger than the funeral party (thought probably not so loud). This was a crowd of many people following Jesus, the prophet and holy man of God, whose reputation as a teacher and healer preceded him and attracted this great following. The two crowds met each other, and Jesus stopped, noticed the woman, and was moved by her weeping. He told her not to cry, approached the bier carrying the deceased young man, and touched it. Everyone was finally silent, as he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

And to the surprise of everyone, the dead man sat up and began to speak! And Luke says that Jesus gave him to his mother. No one had ever seen or heard of such a wondrous thing. At first fear gripped everyone in the crowd, but then they started praising God, singing and shouting "*Hallelujah! A great prophet has risen among us!*" "*God has looked favorably on his people!*" From that moment many more people heard what Jesus had done, and word spread rapidly about him throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. Thanks be to God!

Reading this gospel story on the same day as the Old Testament lesson from 1st Kings, you can hardly miss the parallel between what the great prophet Elijah had done and what Jesus did, on those days long ago and far between. If you remember the Elijah story, which our senior choir sang about in their concert last November, Elijah had predicted a great famine in the land because of the people's lack of faith. Elijah himself had also suffered from hunger, and was near death. He fortunately came upon a poor widow and her son, who had shared with him their last food, saving Elijah's life. But soon after, the widow's son tragically died of illness, and her despair was great. She accused Elijah in her despair, wondering why he had brought death to her house, when she had saved his life. Elijah was overcome with grief himself, and prayed desperately to God for compassion and to restore the child's life. And the scripture says, "The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived." And so Elijah took the child and gave him to his mother, once again alive. So the woman now knew that Elijah was a man of God, who spoke the word of God's truth.

The gospel parallels this story in Jesus' compassion for the widow of Nain, who had also lost her son, and the suffering she faced. But in this case, Jesus became the presence of God himself; he didn't pray to God, but directly commanded the boy to rise himself. The reaction of the people of the town to what Jesus did was like the widow's reaction to Elijah – but not only was Jesus a prophet like Elijah, in Jesus they could see God's favor to God's people. Even to the poor, suffering widows and simple townspeople of Galilee, who never drew any notice from royalty or from Romans except when something was demanded from them (like taxes). In Jesus the people saw how God could look on their predicament with compassion and favor (like the angel had said to the shepherds at Jesus' birth). Jesus also showed the power of God to do something about their plight, even raising those who were dead to life.

So what do these two old stories have to do with us today? Today you and I don't have the power to intervene with death and keep our loved ones alive, however much we wish we could. Sometimes we think our doctors might have this power, and sometimes medical miracles do happen, though not often. What medicine often does today is extend life, though it cannot be extended forever, and life cannot be restored by medicine after one has died (only God can do that!). But we still remember today, as people of faith, how Jesus had the power of God to heal the sick and raise the dead – even to be raised to life himself after he had been crucified! Do you remember this – so soon after the feast of Easter?

Still, many of us throughout the world share the condition and plight of people like the poor widow in the Elijah story or the widow of Nain in Luke, who suffered from poverty and from the loss of their loved ones. I think of the sadness of those of you who have lost a spouse in recent memory, and of the brothers and sisters in Christ from this congregation who have died, or who through aging or illness are suffering today. I think of the poor woman who came from Cambodia with my wife and sister-in-law to America, whose 18-year-old daughter took her own life this past week; we don't know why. Yes, there is much pain and sadness today. But we gather as people of hope, to hear another ending to tragic stories.

Today we worship a God who listens, who promises to hear our prayers and invites us to come to him and share them with each other. Today are reminded in the introduction to the Rite of Healing that “Jesus healed many as a sign of the reign of God come near and sent the disciples to continue this work of healing – with prayer, the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil. And so in the name of Jesus Christ, the great healer and reconciler of this world, we now entrust to God all who are in need of healing.” Today we pray for those suffering, and for God to hear us and listen, to have mercy on us all. But not only for God to hear; for we also can have compassion as followers of Jesus to comfort the suffering and grieving. We can help care for the needs and suffering of those afflicted with

illness. Today we observe the rite of healing as a congregation, to remember God's gift of life and the power to heal – not only given to Jesus in a special way, but also given to us through the power of faith! We have a role in the healing, through our love for one another. So I invite you to come to the altar today, first to receive this rite of laying on of hands and the oil of healing as a reminder of God's compassion for you, and God's power to heal the wounds of the world. And then, to come once again to the altar to receive the promise of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in the bread and wine, which through faith are to us the very body and blood of Christ, "given and shed for you."

So I invite you to remember God's compassion and love for you, and to come to receive the gift of healing and the free gift of grace in our Lord's Supper. And in these sacred rites may you and I be assured of God's love, God's power, and God's favor for all God's children! Come with trust, come with hope, come with blessed assurance of God's love and healing. For it is here, waiting for you. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! Amen.