

Sermon on Luke 7:11-17  
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 5, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

I remember the first funeral procession I ever saw in my life, when I was nine years old, on Monday, November 25, 1963. It was the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, who had been assassinated on November 22 in Dallas, Texas, an act that traumatized a post-World War II nation in the aftermath of the sleepy 50s, the Eisenhower years, but now entering the tension of the fight for civil rights and the beginnings of the divisive Vietnam War. We were all in shock after the abrupt and violent end of the new “Camelot” era optimism of the early 60s. I still remember camped out in the living room of the new home we had just moved into in Richfield, laying on a mattress, watching the funeral procession on our black and white tv. I recall that our whole nation was in mourning, and watched leaders and dignitaries from around the world silently follow the late President’s casket in solemn, black and white. The most poignant image from that day was seeing the president’s 3-year-old son stand and salute as the casket passed by, a symbol of the respectful sadness everyone felt. Many of you remember this, as well.

I have watched and been part of many funeral processions since that day, but perhaps none so transformational. Because it seems that this president’s death and funeral marked a transformation in our nation’s optimistic, youthful embrace of the future with the bitter realization that violence, tragedy and death can change everything “in a moment, in the blinking of an eye” (as scripture says). I have watched other televised funeral processions for Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa and Princess Diana in the years since, and though they all are sad, none seemed so memorable as this. As a pastor I have walked in funeral processions by the hundreds over 30 years of ministry – some traumatic and sorrowful, some simply sad, others have been “just what you do”, in a ritual to remember the sanctity of a life that has been lost. I have buried my mother also, close relatives and friends – as you have as well. We all know the sadness of a funeral procession for a loved one or friend who has died. We don’t expect a miracle.

So today the gospel begins with a funeral procession, for a young man who has unexpectedly died – perhaps from illness, or a tragic accident, we don’t know. Jesus was in a procession of sorts himself – he had left the town of Capernaum by the sea, where he had healed the Centurion’s slave (last week – if you missed it on the holiday weekend). Jesus and his disciples walked to a town called Nain, which was in the hill country to the south – almost to the border of Judea, followed by a large crowd of people who had heard of Jesus’ great miracle of healing, or heard his preaching on the plain, and wanted to see and hear more. So this parade of

people following this holy man of God, this preacher and healer, approached the gate of this little town, and encountered a funeral procession. A man who had died was being carried out on a bier, accompanied by his mother – who was a widow – and a large crowd of villagers – friends and perhaps his family – wailing in grief or walking in silence (we don't know). Luke writes that when Jesus saw the man's mother, the widow – *the Lord had compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep"*. Luke says that Jesus stepped forward and touched the bier carrying the man, and the bearers stood still. He said, "*Young man, I say to you, rise!*" Just as he would later say to Lazarus, who had already been buried in his tomb.

It must have been the strangest sight of all – Jesus stopping a funeral procession, holding onto the bier, and telling a dead man to get up! Whatever was he doing? Everyone must have been struck silent with shock. But the most wondrous thing happened next. You'll never guess – because this just does not happen. *The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.* (Just like Elijah had handed over the young boy who was dying to his mother in the Old Testament lesson we read first. The widow's son, who was dead, was now alive! The woman from Zarepath had said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true!" As for those in the funeral procession, first of all *fear seized all of them; but they glorified God, saying "A great prophet has risen among us! And "God has looked favorably on his people!"* This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. The sick are made well, and the dead are raised to life!

Besides the awesome miracle of raising a dead man to life, which is no small thing indeed, we must also focus on *why* Jesus did this, in this small town, for this dead man and this widow, his mother – of whom there were many thousands in Galilee and Judea. Why, and for what purpose? Well, first of all, Luke and the other gospel writers (but especially Luke) made it a point to let us readers know that it was Jesus' compassion for people suffering that made him stop in his journey from town to town, on the way to preach in a synagogue or go to someone's house for dinner – whatever he was doing, and notice the person in their pain and misery. So Jesus saw this procession, carrying a dead man, and saw the mother, a widow, who would now be left without a husband or a son to provide for her means of living. This was long before there was anything imagined like Social Security, or senior care, medical assistance, food stamps or public housing. If a woman, elderly man or a child did not have a head of household to be responsible for their care, they would most likely be forced to become a servant, a laborer, or to beg for a daily meal or shelter – or simply starve, or die of exposure or sickness. Jesus knew this common consequence of death in farms and rural villages in Palestine, and so *Jesus intervened. Jesus stopped the procession, confronted death itself and ordered the dead man to rise up!* This was not a public relations stunt to

get more publicity for his “man of God” campaign – or “make Judea great again!” This was a dramatic confrontation by the Son of God of death itself – it was like an exorcism in reverse! Instead of telling an army of demons to leave a human being, Jesus ordered the breath of life to return to a man who had died, so that he could continue to care for his mother and the others in his household. It was all done for reasons of compassion, to give back life, where it had been taken away. Jesus had done the impossible. And fear gripped the people – followed with praise.

So what do we take away from this story today, 2000 years later? Besides the obvious – that this is a great miracle of God, done through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Son, our Lord. It shows the healing power of God as shown in a man named Jesus, how Jesus was not only a great prophet, but the Messiah, who had God’s power to even raise the dead to life! This is the one whom we follow as disciples, the one who has compassion for the suffering, and intervenes to transform mourning and sadness into joy and new life! This changes everything we consider natural and safe.

So for us, it means seeing God not only in the awesome Creator who rules the Universe, but also in Jesus Christ who lived among us, felt everything that we feel, suffered along with us, and felt compassion and empathy for a mother’s suffering and pain. So isn’t it a definition of discipleship to imitate and follow Jesus in the empathy for others and compassion our Lord has for every living being? But our calling even goes beyond empathy to acting with love for our neighbor in pain just like Jesus does! In the midst of his own mission and journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus noticed - and stopped - that funeral procession, in order to make a life-changing, life-giving impact on that dead man and his mother. And so Jesus not only intervened with that procession, he did an intervention on us! No more can we think of faith in our Lord as merely for the purpose of salvation and everlasting life, beyond this world. Faithful discipleship means following Jesus in that compassion he had for others, noticing the pain around us, and intervening as we can for good in the lives of others.

So we notice the pain of others in our congregation, and in our communities and workplaces, and pray for them, encouraging and assisting them as we are able. When we see the suffering from major illness or death in a family, we may bring a hot dish, or offer some other kind of assistance. When we see how young men in this community suffer from the inability to find work or housing after being in prison, we can help support programs like Ujamaa Place, that help them get training and find employment or a home. When seniors in our country suffered as a group from poverty a generation ago, we passed legislation that eased their suffering by creating social security, then later medicare and other life-giving programs. When we see women suffer from domestic abuse we look for ways to address the violence in their homes and protect them from harm. When people do

not have medical insurance at their jobs, we work to legislate paid family leave and Earned Sick and Safe Time so they don't have to choose between going to work sick or care for their families - and not be paid. We can't raise the dead, but together we can make miracles of love happen, through faith.

For such responses of compassion for others is the work of God, acting in us as instruments of God's love, mercy, and justice. When others see such acts of compassion, instead of judgment and condemnation coming from the Church, they will see that God is good, and looks favorably upon God's people. Thanks be to God for sending a Son, who has given his life out of compassion and mercy so that we might live. May God strengthen us to be witnesses to Christ and his compassionate love, and so bring hope and joy to the suffering people of this world. And may all our words and deeds bring glory to God, and peace to God's people.  
Amen.