

Luke 7:11-17

EXTENDING GOD'S REACH

Have you ever experienced a miracle or have you witnessed a miracle that happened to someone else? I have been privileged to be present for certain miracles during my ministry. The miracle that comes to mind the most took place about twelve years ago. My friends, "Joe and Mary," were looking forward to the birth of their child. However, Mary went into labor three months early and she gave birth to a fifteen-ounce baby girl (yes, you heard right; the baby weighed 15 ounces!). I saw "Annie" five minutes after she was born; the obstetrician was holding her in the palm of his hand. At that time, I remember thinking that the baby might not live. However, due to a lot of prayer and very good medical care in the neo-natal unit, Annie emerged from the hospital about three months later. Since she was born three months premature, her development was very slow and it was difficult to determine if she had any health issues. Annie didn't talk for the longest time so communication was a problem.

When Annie was about eighteen months old, her dad was holding her in the kitchen. Annie spotted an ant crawling along the counter. She pointed to the ant with her finger and then tracked the ant's progress as it walked along the countertop. Annie's action brought a flood of relief, comfort, and hope to her parents and many others because it revealed that her eyes, brain, and hand were all working and functioning together. Annie is now a teenager and, despite having to wear glasses and hearing aids, she is doing well and living a very active life. Whenever I think of Annie and her parents, I give thanks to God for the miracle of her life and health.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Luke tells the miraculous account of Jesus raising a dead man back to life and then giving him to his mother. Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd came to the town of Nain and, as they approached the gate, a funeral procession was coming out to bury a man, who had died. Luke informs us that the deceased was "his mother's only son, and she was a widow." These two details alert us to the fact that a woman left in a man's world without her husband and only son was destitute. Unless she had wealth, which this woman probably did not, she was bereft of her family and companionship; and, she was without her principle source of identity, support, and protection in the future. She was the epitome of the vulnerable and marginalized.

Even though no one asked Jesus to do anything, nevertheless, he acted because he understood her desperate situation and he had compassion for her. He told her, "Do not cry," then he went over, touched the coffin, and commanded, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" The once dead son sat up and began talking. Jesus presented him to his mother and, in doing so, Jesus not only gave her son back to her, he restored the woman as well to a place of protection and security. Jesus restored life to both the mother and her son. Both would have a future where before Jesus there was nothing but a dead end.

What can we glean from this Gospel account? To be sure, this miraculous raising of the widow's son foreshadows the raising of God's own Son where the power of death is defeated once and for all. The biblical narrative for today points us to the empty tomb and the risen Lord, who has conquered death – and that's something we never get tired of hearing and affirming. After all, the whole point of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the triumph over death for all humanity. That's God's agenda: nothing less than the redemption of all creation, including you and me. Jesus gave the widow's dead son life once again. And, by his death and resurrection, Jesus has given us life, now and forever.

This story reminds us that Jesus also knows us inside and out. He is aware of the circumstances of our lives and the situations that surround us. No matter what is going on in your life or mine, Jesus sees us, knows us through and through, and looks on us with compassion. One of our former presidents ruined a perfectly good phrase – "I feel your pain" – and yet, that is precisely what Jesus does. He feels our pain and he carries "the lion's share" of our heavy burdens. We may think we are all alone with our problems and our worries, but the African-American spiritual is right on target when it states: "Nobody knows the trouble I see, Nobody knows but Jesus..." Jesus sees; Jesus knows; Jesus cares; Jesus shares the load (or sends others to help us); and, Jesus gives us the strength to cope and carry on despite the

difficulties. That in itself is a real miracle! We don't give up. Instead, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we rise up and meet the challenges of life head on!

Luke tells his audience this story in order to signal that the old world (ruled by Satan and marked by social inequity, sickness, poverty, injustice, separation, violence, and death) is giving way to the Realm of God (a new age characterized by the purposes of God for all to enjoy health, abundance, justice, community, love, peace, and life everlasting).

Unless I'm mistaken, I think that's where we come into the story. The Spirit of God was given at Pentecost and even now so that we might have the mind and the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Like the Master, we (his disciples) are called to pay attention, extend God's reach of love, and have compassion especially on those who grieve, who are the destitute in our community, and the anonymous ones.

In our Gospel story, Jesus intrudes on a funeral and brings forth life. So we too, as the living, breathing body of Christ in this time and place, are to have a tangible impact on our world, to be living reminders that God's desire for all of humanity, in addition to living eternally with him, is for abundance of life now. Someone (Philip Jacob Spener) said it well: "We are to be different because Christ is in us. The world is to be different because we are in it."

At a recent church assembly, a band played for worship and during the breaks between sessions. Various members of the band would occasionally say a few words by way of introduction. Except one, the rhythm guitarist. She simply played, never said a word. Until the last morning. That morning, as the assembly members were sitting and chatting with each other at their tables, she stepped up to her mic and said, "I just wanted to say thanks." The conversation died down as everyone turned their attention to the stage. "A few years ago," she began, "my life was pretty messed up. I was on the outside, looking in. Didn't care about much. Church? Couldn't care less. God? Couldn't care less." "But then," she told the assembly, "something happened. You came out. You were on the inside, and you came out. You welcomed me. You told me that the tattoos didn't matter. You meant it! You were real. After a while I started to get to know this Jesus, and I got to know him through you. So, I just wanted to say thanks." Somebody stopped this young woman's march of death, spoke grace, and brought forth life. Was it you? In the grace and power of God, will it be you? (Roger Gustafson)

As we come to the table of our Lord Jesus, let us keep on moving, extending God's reach of love and grace outside of these four walls and into the community. By the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, may God turn us "inside out" so that we help others out in the community to hear the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and, may they join us in coming back to life – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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