

Live a Generous Life

Luke 7:36-50

October 14, 2018

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

“To the middle-aged woman who gestured angrily and yelled as we passed...To the 30-something man in the power suit who honked and forced his black SUV through our line...To the person who tried to pass us and then moved his car into our lane to block our progress,” writes Rev. Cindy Maddox in *The Huffington Post*, the officiating pastor of a funeral that became a motorcade to the cemetery. She continues,

Perhaps you don't know. Perhaps you didn't recognize the hearse and the flapping flags on the first few cars. Perhaps you didn't notice that we all had our lights on and our hazards flashing. Perhaps your mama never taught you to show respect for the dead by showing kindness to the grieving. You couldn't know, of course, that the woman inside the hearse was in her 20's. You couldn't know that she leaves behind parents and siblings and a young husband and a one-year-old baby girl. You couldn't know anything about the person in that hearse or the many people who followed. But you still could have stopped. You could have waited. You could have recognized that someone else's pain was greater than your need to get to lunch.

A funeral procession is not about getting to the cemetery at the same time. A funeral procession is a chain of connection, a visible sign of the invisible bond of grief. Her parents saw you -- you were just the first of many who will be impatient with their grief. Her younger siblings saw you -- breaking the chain of cars that separated them from their sister's body and their parents' arms. You see, a funeral procession is not about getting to the cemetery at the same time. A funeral procession is a chain of connection, a visible sign of the invisible bond of grief.

To the grieving, it is inconceivable that the world keeps going when their world stopped. They cannot understand how the rest of the world keeps spinning, not aware that it has lost something precious, when their world will never be the same. They will go through the coming weeks and months and maybe years with a hole in their gut that will be virtually invisible to everyone who passes. But for this day, this moment, they are seen. And if their grief doesn't stop the world, at least it should stop traffic.

As a pastor, it is our job -- and our honor, our blessing and our burden -- to sit with families in the midst of their pain, to hold their hands, to try to bring them comfort when the unthinkable has happened. We listen to their stories. We help them plan a

service that honors their loved one. We help them choose a scripture for the service, whether they know many by heart, or know only that their loved one believed, or know only that they want something religious just in case. We create a bubble, or maybe a cocoon -- a safe space where they can remember and cry and laugh and sit together in grief and anger and know that whatever they're feeling is OK.

It is heart-breaking to sit in those front pews, and it is gut-wrenching to watch those who sit in the front pews. But we are in it together -- this thing called life, this thing called grief, this thing called love. And then we move from that space, together, for one last difficult act after so many others -- one that nobody ever wants to imagine but always fears -- to see our loved one's remains laid in the earth. So we follow the car in front of us, knowing that we are still in it together, still bound by our shared grief even as we go out into this busy, impatient, insensitive world.

To the grieving, it is inconceivable that the world keeps going when their world stopped. And if their grief doesn't stop the world, at least it should stop traffic. So for those of you who were so angry that a funeral procession made you a few minutes late, I have a few suggestions. The next time this happens, try not to think of the fact that you missed one rotation of the lights; think instead about what the people in those cars will miss. Try not to think of being late for your lunch date; think about the people who will never again get to meet their loved one for lunch. Try to consider that maybe you could inconvenience yourself for one moment to allow a hurting family to stay together, to show them that you see them and you recognize their loss.

I hope you can do this because one day, you'll be the one driving with your lights on and your hazards flashing, needing to follow closely so you don't lose your connection, don't lose your way. And I hope the world will stop for you. ¹

Luke tells us the story of a woman who couldn't believe the world would keep going when her world had stopped. She let her hair down in public. Scholars are unsure whether it was grief that caused her tears or devotion and gratitude for something Jesus must have done earlier. But it was clearly scandalous behavior in public to make such an embarrassing show of things. She let the tears fall without regard for what others were going to think or say. Her heart was breaking and she was tired of life as it was. But in her simple act of devotion she discovered the deep truth of the Gospel. She is seen — not defined by either her grief or her mistakes — but really seen for who she is by the Lord of Life.

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stopping-traffic-for-grief_b_10971440

By contrast, Simon the Pharisee, the host, finds her behavior upsetting. He's surprised. Not so much by the fact that this woman has crashed his dinner party. That is bad enough. But he's surprised with Jesus! He says to himself, loud enough for everyone to hear at the table, "If this man, Jesus, were really a prophet, he would be able to see what sort of woman this is, who makes such a fuss over him. She's part of the problem we're talking about! She's not a religious person. She's an outsider, a sinner. Can't Jesus see who this woman is?" If Jesus doesn't know who she is, then he's no prophet. If he does know and yet allows her to touch him, he's no prophet, because such intimacies would never be tolerated by a real prophet. Whatever her condition, she believed Jesus had the power and presence to do something and so she made contact with him. She believed Christ could help her and she simply trusted him to do so.

Jesus is so interesting. Jesus wanted to put people in touch with God. He did not go around trying to set up a welfare state, but to proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. As far as we can tell, Jesus is not so much interested in the rights of people as the rule of God. His ministry was that of the Kingdom of God, and here's the paradoxical thing; he changed the world! He didn't create a single welfare agency himself and yet, he has inspired every one that exists. He changed the world by changing the hearts of people. And he's just as interested in Simon's heart as he is in the heart of this woman.

Jesus points out that when he arrived at Simon's home there was no act of hospitality for him, no washing of his feet, a sign of Near Eastern graciousness and hospitality. But here is this woman, who has received Jesus not into her home but into her life with effusive and extravagant gratitude and hospitality.

Simon is an old pro at events like this. He's an insider. He grew up in the church like Jesus. He had come to expect such evenings — no surprises, no gratitude, and not much hospitality — just another church dinner. But then there is this woman who isn't very religious and doesn't know how to act apparently in social situations, but who is extravagant in her welcome and reception of Jesus. Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Our problem is that we see what we want to see, what we expect to see. And we turn a blind eye towards those we do not want to see. Have you ever had someone shake your hand but look over your shoulder for someone more important in the room? They don't even see you,

though they are going through the motions of meeting you. They look right through you. Jesus sees the woman, not her grief or her past but really sees the woman.

A congregation once did a comprehensive study of church growth. “Our problem is we never have any visitors,” one of the committee members noted. So they did an exercise to help them look at their church as some visitor might look at it. These people had always considered themselves a “friendly church.” And it certainly seemed friendly to them. Yet a first time visitor reported that they did not find it very friendly. Folks were so busy glad-handing and welcoming each other, they never even noticed a visitor. Didn't even see them. How are we like that church and like Simon? We are insiders who understand church functions and go through the motions with little real hospitality to others and little real gratitude or generosity. Then someone comes along for whom faith, hope and love becomes a well-spring within them. And the encounter with Jesus is so real and tangible that it affects them to their core and they begin coming to church not for what they can get but because of what they have to give.

It is precisely that: “walking the talk,” that caught the attention of Jesus that day. Here was someone who lived her life on the outside consistent with the gratitude she held on the inside. And Jesus pointed at her and said, “There – be like her! Live your faith like that!”

Her example of selflessness, her simplistic generosity motivated by faith stands as a reminder to us that each and every one of us can live by faith and “walk our talk” as she did.

Where do we still live with duplicity rather than the simplicity of faith? Perhaps we should re-examine the value of simple acts of devotion, faith and faithfulness. There is value in living with integrity – and each life, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can be lived faithfully and with impact that far exceeds our limited calculations. Don't give up on integrity. Don't give up on generosity. Don't give in to the temptation to think your faithfulness doesn't matter. You never know who is watching or what ripple you may be making! After all, long ago, an unnamed woman simply made a gift of herself and it has been remembered for thousands of years.

“Do you see this woman?” Jesus asked the man, who knows the truth but who has ceased to be excited by it. “Do you see her extravagant, earthy hospitality?” The way she welcomes Jesus into her heart and life, puts Simon's rather detached, cold, distant, calculating way of seeing

Jesus to shame. Simon was probably a splendid man, a man of faith, probably a friend of Jesus. But it was this woman whose life was changed. “So I tell you,” said Jesus, “that her many sins are forgiven, for she has shown much love.” And he said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace!”

How might you be willing to inconvenience yourself for the sake of what matters? It's stewardship Sunday. What are you willing to give so we can invest in creating safe space, a “cocoon” here, a lighthouse here for the faith, and the faithful, and for all those whom others do not see?

“I hope you can do this because one day, you'll be the one driving with your lights on and your hazards flashing, needing to follow closely so you don't lose your connection, don't lose your way. And I hope the world will stop for you.”²

“For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by His poverty you might be made rich.”³ Amen

² Ibid.

³ 2 Corinthians 8:9