

“Healed in Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 7: 11-17

We just observed the Memorial Day holiday in our country, when we honor and give thanks for those women and men who have died as members of the armed forces. I’ve had the great privilege to visit some of our most hallowed military cemeteries, and each Memorial Day, I cannot help but think of those very somber and meaningful places. The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii; the Normandy American Cemetery in France; Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. These are just some of the many sacred grounds we hold in high regard as American citizens, recognizing the great sacrifice many have made on our behalf.

When our family visited Arlington National Cemetery a couple of years ago, we happened to observe the conclusion of a funeral, as the members of the military departed from the gravesite. As the honor guards returned to their post, I was struck by the rider-less horse, with the military boots placed backwards in the stirrups. And I was struck by the empty horse-drawn caisson, which had carried the flag-draped casket to the burial site. All you heard were the click-clack of the horses’ feet, and the rumble of the wheels along the pavement. In a setting like Arlington, it was deeply moving to consider that moment, surrounded by the headstones of thousands of others who had fought in so many conflicts throughout history.

These memories from Arlington came to mind when I first read this story from the Gospel of Luke. We read that as Jesus was entering the town of Nain, he and his disciples encountered a funeral procession. But this was not for a person who had lived well into old age; it was for a man who “was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow” (7:12). I could not help but think of those families of military members who have had similar experiences: grieving far too early over the death of a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a mother or father.

And yet, once again, when the world sees death and hopelessness, God sees life and eternal promise through his Son, Jesus Christ. For it is through Jesus’ deep compassion and love for the broken that we are invited to be healed ourselves of whatever ails our hearts and souls.

On the surface, this looks like a “normal” miracle story from the gospels – if you can call a miracle normal. But there are several factors that further illuminate our knowledge of who Jesus is and how God is acting in the lives of the other characters.

First, when we read other miracle accounts in the gospels, it often begins with someone seeking Jesus out for help: someone who is ill, or a family member or friend seeking Jesus' healing touch. Usually Jesus is on the receiving end of others' wants and desires. But in this case, the widow who is grieving her son's death does not seek out Jesus. Nor do any of her friends who are grieving with her. Instead, Jesus is the one who initiates the contact and the miracle: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep'" (7:14). Jesus senses what is happening, reaches out to the woman, and offers a level of care no one else could offer.

Second, consider the emotion Jesus shows to the woman: compassion. The Greek word used in this passage for "compassion" is used two other times later in Luke's Gospel: when the Samaritan comes upon the stripped and beaten man (10:33), and when the father of the prodigal sees his son for the first time far down the road (15:20). In both of those cases, it is a deep level of mercy and love that is shown to the one who is broken. Likewise, Jesus sees in this woman a hurt and pain that is even beyond her ability to ask for help, and that is what motivates his contact with her.

Third, consider who this woman was at that time in the Jewish world. One commentator describes it in this way: Widows had a tenuous position in Jesus' day. They were often linked with orphans as those without provision in Jewish society. After the death of a husband, it was customary for the brother or other relative of the deceased to marry the widow. In cases where no male relative from the family of her husband was available, the widow moved to the margins of society and fell vulnerable to alienation and exclusion from the community and the simple daily provision of familial care. Further, the death of an only son would leave a widow without an heir and therefore unable to retain whatever means remained for her. Without an heir, all personal property reverted to the husband's family after his death.

(As a result), Jesus' act of compassion demonstrated . . . God's regard for those at the margins. It is easy for us to forget the risks Jesus took to demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth. Notice that his compassion is extended to the mother who lived, not to the son who had died . . . And Jesus is willing to risk rebuke for exercising God's special mercy for the least among society. His mercy is a foretaste of the compassion he felt toward his own mother from the cross (John 19:26-27) (Verlee A. Copeland, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 119).

Finally, Jesus doesn't just show compassion to the woman; his compassion leads him to take action. "Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother" (7:14-15). His identity as the Son of God is not

just one who comes and preaches about the Kingdom of God. His identity as God's Son is also to show forth in the here and now that God's Kingdom has come. And indeed, the crowd's - and his disciples' - reaction bears witness to this identity: "Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!'" (7:16).

This miracle story reveals the depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ: who comes to us in compassion amidst our pain; who recognizes and values those who are on the margins of society; and who acts in mercy and justice to bring about hope and wholeness.

But how do we remain hopeful when our prayers do not always appear to be answered? How do we stay faithful to our God when it feels as if our world is crashing in around us? How do we trust in our God when we look around us, and all we see is heartbreak and violence and pain, and we wonder why God would allow such things to happen - including parents having to bury their own children?

Jan Holton writes: Amazingly, like the widowed mother in our story, sometimes we actually get the grand miracle we pray for. The father or husband whose heart stops on the operating table is brought back from the clutches of death. The mother of two young children beats the odds and survives the cancer that all doctors said would kill her. More often than not, in spite of doing everything right and praying for every good thing, the sixteen-year-old who just got (his) license still dies when the car (he) is driving hits a tree. Where is God's compassion then?

We cannot stop ourselves from praying for even the most impossible of miracles, especially when it concerns the lives of those we love. We cling to a central message of the gospel: in Christ Jesus all things are possible. In reality our lives, like that of Jesus, are filled with messy unfinished edges, not the nice tidy ending that the widowed mother in our story experiences. We must come to recognize miracles that come in other less dazzling forms. Indeed, when we focus on only one vision of what is possible, we become blinded to the many moments in which God's compassion reaches into our lives to hear, touch, and stand in the chaos of life, helping us to find new meaning even in the greatest tragedy. Jesus can hear the cries hidden in the deepest crevices of our despair, just as he heard the heart of the grieving widow. He touches us in the place of our greatest pain, just as he reached into the place of death upon the funeral bier. Jesus steps into the chaos of our unpredictable, overturned, or shattered world to bring meaning from even the most desolate suffering (ibid, 121).

As we walk this journey of faith, may we remember that we are never alone, for our God meets us in the form of his Son to bring meaning and hope and love even in the most chaotic of times.

Thanks be to God. Amen.