

3 Pentecost, Proper 5, Yr. C  
June 5, 2016  
Luke 7: 11-17

One of the skills they teach in law school is the ability to look at a situation and spot all the legal issues there. I was thinking that the counter-part to that, in Bible study, is something like the African Bible method, where everyone hears the same passage and then is asked to share with the group what “jumped out at them,” what caught their attention in the passage. While the legal method is designed to be objective analysis, the Bible study method is not – that’s designed to let the text speak to you, maybe to speak to something going on in your life, or perhaps to challenge you. It can be one of the ways in which you hear God’s voice. Usually, when you hear a sermon, you hear what jumped out at the preacher. But, this morning, I thought I’d try a slightly different approach, and point out all the things that COULD jump out and comment on each of those. Hopefully, one of those issues will be yours, too.

So, what are we presented with in this morning’s Gospel? There’s the fact of healing, there’s the suffering of the widowed mother, there’s what happens to people when a miracle occurs in their midst, or, in this case, when a great prophet shows up, there’s the issue of faith, there’s Jesus breaking the rules and acting out of a deep compassion, there’s the crowd of onlookers, there are the emotions of grief and hopelessness and fear. Let’s look briefly at each of these.

First of all, there’s the healing; Jesus stops those carrying the young man’s body and says, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” Not only healing, but bringing life out of death. Scholars say this is the kingdom breaking into our reality – surely the mother knows only joy. And it’s worth pointing out something else about this healing. Unlike the one that occurred in last week’s text of the healing of the centurion’s servant, in which Jesus was amazed at the faith of the Roman soldier, in this text, faith doesn’t really play a part at all. Only need. The mother doesn’t ask Jesus to bring her son back to life. In fact, there’s no interaction between Jesus and the mother at all. There’s nothing to say that she and her son were grateful, or that they praised God. It’s simple, pure, unadulterated, unbidden, unearned, un-asked-for grace. God’s gift of abundant life, poured out without regard to worthiness or anything else.

Then there’s the mother. She’s not only a widow, which is bad enough, but now she’s childless as well. As I’m sure you’ll remember, widows, women who were no longer under the protection of a male family member, were always mentioned in the OT, along with orphans, as those who were especially marginalized and therefore especially vulnerable. Women whose husbands had died did not automatically receive his estate and were often left in poverty, ripe for injustice and exploitation. Widows were members of a group called *anawim* – the little ones, the poor ones of God. A woman went from her father’s house to her husband’s. At the death of her husband, she was sometimes taken in marriage by some other male in her husband’s family. If she had a son, he was supposed to care for her until he reached his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, so she found her security in him. If there was no son, that meant there was no heir and the husband’s property reverted to his family, leaving the widow without property, status or livelihood, pushed to the margins of the society. Religious law at the time cautioned against exploiting widows, but in a man’s world, there was no guarantee of safety for a woman unattached to a man. So this

woman is weeping, certainly for the death of her son, but surely also for herself, because her life, for all intents and purposes, is over.

Widows had difficult lives, but as you probably know, women in general had difficult lives. Megan McKenna, a biblical scholar, points out how accepted this was by going back and looking again at the story of the feeding of the 5,000. The text there simply says that there were 5000 people, not counting women and children. They didn't count them, because they didn't count. Women and children were among those people not essential to the community. But at the same time, the vision of Judaism was that they DID matter and that God cares deeply for them and for all those others without status or power – the scripture often listed them: the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens, the prisoners. Caring for them was a measure of one's holiness. To care for them was to show God's covenant love in the world. They were to be treated with compassion.

That's what Jesus did. The text says, first of all that he SAW her. I read somewhere that in this country, women over 40 are often invisible. How much more would that have been the case in Nain. But Jesus SAW her and he knew what she was facing. The text says that he had COMPASSION. It's an interesting word. Com-passion, to feel with. The Greek word means to be physically deeply moved. It implies that you have a visceral, physical response. It's not just an intellectual exercise and it doesn't stop with feeling. The word carries the sense, and we see this in the reading, that the one who FEELS then DOES something about the suffering. I don't know this for sure, but I'm thinking that this is in contrast to the crowd that was with the mother. I'm sure they felt sorry for her, but I'd be willing to guess that after the ritual of the funeral service and the reception that followed, they all went on home. They may have remembered her, but one wonders if anyone would have felt the kind of compassion that would have compelled them to act on her behalf. We could do a whole sermon on that – on the injustice embedded in the culture, on people's acceptance of the suffering that injustice caused, or of the rationale that says, "That's too bad, but that's just the way things are."

But that kind of business as usual attitude is dealt a blow by Jesus' actions. When the dead man sat up and began to speak, the text says that fear seized them and they said that a great prophet has risen among us. Well, first the fear. I think we can all safely say that if, at a funeral service the dead person got up and began to speak, it would rock us to our very foundations. But it's the prophet part I find most interesting. A prophet has risen among us. If you recall all the stories about the prophets, they were a pretty uncomfortable group to have around. And they were uncomfortable because they told it like it is. They exposed the truth about how far people were from living those lives that God wanted them to live. Those in power generally hated them. They were good news to those who were suffering, and most in need, but to most of the population, I would guess, they were, as someone said, like a grain of sand dropped into the workings of a finely-tuned mechanism. Reminds me of a cartoon in the New Yorker in which two guys are stranded in the desert, plodding along and one stops and calls to the other, "Can you hold up a minute? I've got sand in my shoe!" Prophets are the sand in the system, bringing it to a halt, so that all the assumptions, all the lies, all the wrong-doing is exposed.

And finally, I'd like to look at the emotions in this small passage. There's grief. Jesus telling the mother not to weep seems strange. Then as now there's more than enough to weep about. And then there's hopelessness. Surely she was feeling that as well. When Jonathan Eischen was here for Mike's birthday, he and I had a chance to talk about Somalia when he works with an agency contracted to the United Nations. Jonathan said he thought the biggest problem was hopelessness. Young men without education and without jobs found that fighting for \$20 a month with a militia was the only option they had. But Jesus' vision is always otherwise: he tells us and shows us that we can have hope, that we can trust God's reliability and power and that the antidote to the reality of death is the greater reality of God.

That's the vision we've been given. That's the life-long task we've been asked to live out. Showing the world the reality of God, and of the hope and love that that makes possible. We often fail. I remember a heart-breaking story told by a pastor in a small rural congregation. He said that on the first day of vacation Bible school, a little boy showed up. He had walked to the church but, the pastor said, "It was clear that someone had seen to it that he was clean and that his cowlicks were smoothed down and that he was neatly dressed. But it was obvious that he was poor because the front of his shirt was closed by a row of safety pins in place of the missing buttons. And that set him up for ridicule that was crushing to witness." The pastor said, "There, in God's sanctuary, I watched children torment a little boy who was with us to learn about Jesus. His only mistake was thinking he had come to a place where Christ was worshipped...When I attempted to speak to the children's parents, I came up against a harsh realization; the children were only acting out behavior modeled and condoned by their parents." (Christian Century May 2007) That's one painful side. But there's another side to the story and this comes from Nicholas Kristof's book, *Half the Sky*. In that book, he tells about a New Jersey family, comfortable financially but wanting their daughters to know how fortunate they were and how important it was to be conscious of and generous to others. One of those daughters, Jordana Confino, started with a group of friends in middle school, to talk about issues affecting girls around the world and to do something about it. By high school, they had formed Girls Learn International, raising money for girls' education abroad. There are now chapters of this organization in high schools and middle schools around the country. As Kristof said, "American high school students who might otherwise be obsessed with designer bags are sending their spending money abroad so that girls in India can have notebooks. "

Compassion, hope, generosity, abundant life. It's all there in that small passage. The scriptures challenge each of us to allow our hearts to be moved and to live accordingly. Amen.