

St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church

Sermon for Pentecost 2

June 6, 2010

Scriptures: 1 Kings 17:8-16 [17-24]; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; and Luke 7:11-17

We can't help but be struck by the similarity of the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading this morning. Both are about miraculous healings, both reveal the bringing back to life of an only son of a widow, and both point to God's incredible ability to give life to situations that seem to be completely devoid of any heartbeat at all.

It would be convenient to focus on the miraculous healings or to admire the complete faith of Jesus and Elijah as they reached out their hands over the seemingly dead bodies of the two young boys. But there's a story beneath the stories of miraculous healings. So perhaps it would be instructive for us this morning to dwell on the heartbreak of a mother as she grieves over the loss of her only son --- we cannot imagine the pain and helplessness these two women must have felt at this most demanding time in their lives.

And to add insult to injury, both the mothers are described as widows, which means of course, that each has already experienced the death of a loved one. And a very close loved one at that.

In fact, to bring a sort of modern insight to the condition of each grieving mother, we know that of all the common stressful situations we find ourselves in today ---- changing jobs, moving residences, getting a new boss, even going through the Christmas season --- each situation carries with it a numerical stress factor. You and I are always living with some stress, and psychologists tell us that if any one of us builds at least 200 stress points over a two year period, he or she is at risk of sliding into serious depression.

And it's no surprise that for adults, the loss of a spouse is number one on the stress chart, followed closely by the loss of a child. So in both the old and new testament stories, we stand back and shake our heads and wonder what it must feel like for these two mothers to go through the loss of a key individual in their lives --- AGAIN. How much pain can anyone stand? And doesn't it seem that some individuals are called to experience more pain than what seems to be a fair share?

[pause]

To get some help as we struggle with why all this bad stuff is happening to these two apparently good women, we can turn to two authors who have written about this scripture passage and about how we live and die.

First, I share with you from Ken Gire's book *Incredible Moments with the Savior*. Ken builds a vivid and telling picture for us as he writes that the funeral procession for the young man, led by his mother and an open coffin, weaves its way through the village of Nain, on its way to the cemetery just outside of the village walls. A loud chorus of wailing fills the air, complete with outward sorrow and desperate expressions of grief among friends and loved ones --- all in support of the stumbling, tear-stained mother.

But just as the procession arrives at the gate to the village, there is another procession --- this one led by Jesus --- followed by a throng of folks clamoring for position to hear His next words, to watch His next move, to feel His next miracle up close. And out of respect for the dead, the Jesus party halts and pulls back, much like we do today when we pull our cars over to the side of the road and stop for a funeral procession. It's as if they were one by one tipping their hats in sympathy for this shattered woman proceeding through their midst.

And there we have it, says Ken Gire ---- a dramatic picture of life on one side of the gate and death on the other, as if they were two islands, one of raw emotion and the other of intense anticipation. And the tears of the mother seem to silently bridge the gap for Jesus.

And here is the punch line. Here is where it all comes together. The grieving widow does not ask Jesus for ANYTHING. She does not show extraordinary courage or faith. SHE DOES NOT STOP AND BOW AT THE FEET OF JESUS. AND STILL, JESUS REACHES OUT TO HER. WITHOUT A REQUEST, WITHOUT A PLEA. WITHOUT ANY EXPECTATION OF A MIRACLE. As far as we know, the grieving widow DID NOT EVEN KNOW WHO JESUS WAS!

The healing of the widow's young son was a miracle that had no human prompting. It was not an effort to teach the crowd or the disciples or the widow anything. Just an unexpected display of pure, unmatched compassion from the well of divine love. This was Jesus at His tender best. Not in the same dimension that the crucifixion is, of course, but in a more human dimension, a more realistic outreaching dimension that could touch any heart watching that day. He simply could not bear the thought of this lonely, broken woman losing the one thing in her life that gave her a purpose for living.

And that is where we pause with the Gospel story and consider that this is exactly what God cannot bear to watch in us --- that we would lose the one thing in life that can give us meaning. It's not prosperity. It's not success. It's not about taking care of ME. It's not even happiness as we would define it. The message here is not only that with Jesus life triumphs over death. It's not only that God loves His children. The message here is that Jesus proclaimed this simple truth: that we are all in danger of dying before we learn why we are alive.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* that the only real malady of our time is, in a word, is simply this: EMPTINESS. He points repeatedly to the most nagging question of our existence: the question of whether life has MEANING.

In short, Kushner says, we DON'T BECOME HAPPY BY PURSUING HAPPINESS. We become happy by living lives that MEAN SOMETHING.

That's where Jesus comes into the picture in the Gospel story. He saw the grieving widow and immediately reached out to her with great sympathy and compassion. He wasn't asked to do it --- He just did it because that is who He was. It was His NATURE to reach out.

We can easily imagine that in Jesus' time women didn't have much to look forward to in the way of respect or success as we know it. So it is not a stretch for us to say that Jesus knew without being told that she had a desperate need because it was her family that had given her meaning, but now that had evaporated.

Indeed, just like the Gospel story, Jesus knows OUR need without ever asking us. Even when we fail to acknowledge Him, He knows that we desperately seek purpose and meaning in our lives. And that is just what He offers to us. He knows we often need physical healing, but more importantly, He knows that we need healing from the trap of pursuing happiness as a goal, rather than receiving the gift of purpose and ultimate happiness from the Master Himself.

It is only through a living relationship with Jesus that God can so penetrate our lives and bring about HIS perspective in our lives, giving us the one thing we crave the most --- MEANING.

Jesus tells us this time and time again throughout the stories of his life and death and resurrection. He comes to us --- even when we don't know who He is or what He can do for us --- always reaching out to remind us that OUR LIVES WITH HIM HAVE MEANING. He comes to us with such tender compassion, in our anxieties, in our hurts, in our pain, in our suffering, and in our hopes and dreams. Just like He knew the widow's heart and desperate need, He knows OUR hearts and OUR needs, even before we know to ask Him for help in getting our priorities straight.

Just as He spoke tenderly to the crying widow, stooped low under the burden of a loss so great she cannot imagine going on with life, Jesus comes to you and me with an offer of meaning in our lives. He teaches us that to serve ourselves is a dead end, but to serve others gives us purpose. He teaches us that grace and mercy triumph over evil and self-centeredness. He teaches us that life with Him will triumph over death itself. He heals us by setting the example of unwarranted tenderness and sacrifice on the cross, thus giving us as His people a new perspective on the meaning of life. He gives us purpose as we begin with what little strength we can muster to understand what little we can possibly fathom about the whole purpose of living.

And what is that purpose? That you and I are here NOT to glorify ourselves, but TO GLORIFY GOD. PERIOD.

In the two stories of Elijah and Jesus healing the lifeless bodies of the sons of two widows, it is too easy to focus on the revival of the dead boys. But the REAL healing came to the widows. And it comes to you and me today: we have been given life AND meaning. Our days with Jesus give us a strong sense that we are not here for ourselves, but for God. Then and only then do our lives really mean something that is eternal and purposeful.