

"God Visits Us at Our Unloveliest"

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 10
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friends were welcomed at our house when I was growing up. The doorbell was always ringing with people stopping by. Problem was, my timing was usually off. It never failed that when my brother Danny brought his friends over—cuter, older boys than the ones in my grade—they arrived at the door when I was at my unloveliest.

Going through the normal bout of pimples as a teenager, I was fastidious about washing my face, applying witch hazel or Stridex, and then, then I would take a tube of Clearasil, which came in a brown, skin-toned formula, and I would spread it across my face, like icing on a cake. Die, pimples, die! The Clearasil would dry, forming this brown mask that cracked into deep lines if I laughed or spoke. It was not unlike some special effects I've seen in horror movies.

Then, just as the Clearasil hardened, and I settled on the living room sofa to watch some TV—well, that was precisely the time the doorbell would ring and my brother's friends would arrive. Needless to say, I did not make the greatest impression. How I would have preferred Danny tell me ahead of time that his friends were on their way. I would have taken a chisel and chipped off that brown mask of Clearasil, applied a little blush and powder, then posed myself just so on the sofa, waiting for the doorbell. But that's never how it worked.

When someone comes to call, we usually hope to look our loveliest. Even with folks we know quite well. I've been married to Randy for 22 years, and know and love my mother and father-in-law, and my sisters-in-law and their family. Yet when I host a family party (as I did this past Memorial Day weekend), I still want the place to look lovely. Bathrooms clean, fresh and deodorized. Flat surfaces dusted and the kitchen floor shiny. Pillows fluffed, pictures straightened, and magazines on the coffee table strategically-angled. These people know me. They know the house doesn't always look like that. Yet I persist in the illusion. (Of course, sensible Randy thinks I ought to wait to clean until the party's over, because 13 of us can make quite a mess. Then go through the house, he says.)

You know, there is a different type of housecleaning that occurs when someone comes to visit. Most of us would not think to air our dirty laundry when guests come—and I'm not referring to the shirts and socks. We choose not to discuss our medical problems or family squabbles or mental health or marital pressures or the heavy debt load we carry. We choose to hide our crankiness and our moodiness, our frustrations and anxieties deep inside, putting our best face on. Life is just picture-perfect, right? Because we figure our guests don't want to hear our

problems, and we also believe they can't do anything about our problems. So that's where most of us leave it—we wipe out the bathroom sinks, dust off the furniture, shove our personal difficulties in the closet and hope no one notices. We sit there, posed just so on the sofa, waiting for the doorbell to ring.

But sometimes our timing is off. There are days when we can't put up a false front anymore. That "best face we put on" gives way to ugly reality. Sometimes we are at our unloveliest, for all the world to see.

Like the widow from our Gospel lesson today—this widow from Nain whose only son had just died. She is truly unlovely at the moment Jesus draws near. The greatest tragedy to befall a human had befallen her. Her spouse had already died, and as if that weren't ugly enough, her only child, her son, had died as well. She was alone—emotionally, but financially too, for she had no one to support her anymore. She'd have to rely on her village to offer its pity to sustain her. Her troubles, her sorrow, were out there in the open for all to see. She was weeping, and that made her all the more unlovely. There are few things as painful to see as raw grief welling up out of another human being. We feel helpless when we look upon someone sobbing uncontrollably, and our own guts are wrenched in pain as we watch them. We might have the heart to hold them as they cry, but the truth is often we don't know what to do, and we want to look away. I think a person experiencing that grief in public realizes that. This woman, at her son's funeral, in this unlovely, bleak hopelessness of grief, does not even ask for help from Jesus. She just weeps.

And yet, at her unloveliest moment, Jesus sees this woman and Luke says the Lord "had compassion for her..." He tells her not to weep. He touches the funeral bier upon which her dead son lay. He touches her heartache. And then the Lord brings her son to life, restoring him to his mother. The crowds are simply amazed, and Luke records them saying, "God has looked favorably on his people." (Literally, "God has visited his people," "looked in on his people.") The crowds don't fully understand, but they know that God is somehow graciously present in Jesus, visiting his people, looking in on his people. They are sure of God's visiting, for Jesus could only have this power for new life if God, the creator of life, was with him.

The entire Gospel of Luke is rich with stories where our Lord visits his people, visits the unlovely: The sick, the dying, the criminal, the outcast, the misunderstood, the sinful, the despairing. From the leper he touched and healed to the short-statured Zaccheus he called down from the tree to the thief on the cross he brought into paradise, Jesus has come to humans at their ugliest moments and made them lovely again. In Luke, it seems as if Jesus purposely seeks out the unlovely, bringing to them the goodness of God.

He still does that. We began this service with a confession of our sins. No hiding our failures in the cupboard or trying to dust and polish our persons, but an honest self-appraisal before God who promises to be with us when we gather in his name. Yes, in our confession, the soap scum in the sink is visible, the picture frames are

askew. Yet, having heard the unvarnished truth from our lips and our hearts, our gracious God nevertheless offers forgiveness, and the opportunity to begin anew. And while I cannot know exactly what you think about during worship, it may well be that halfway through the sermon or in the middle of a song, or later on during one of our prayers, you'll hook into some word, some image, and you'll think again of your hurts and your worries, all this raw unloveliness of your human predicament once more laid bare in your own mind. But know that it is also laid bare in the mind of God this day. He knows about it all. For God is visiting his people here today.

The good news is we don't have to try to hide our unloveliness from him. Jesus went up to that grieving mother and widow in Nain. Jesus willingly came near and touched that pain. And just as Jesus had compassion for that woman, he has compassion for us. His actions in restoring that son to his mother anticipate our his own resurrection—and ours. We come here today all unlovely, but we leave here today, forgiven, restored, comforted, strengthened. Jesus promises a newness in our lives because of his life, as he breaks death's hold on us, destroys sin's power over us, and calls us to a loveliness in his own image.

As a community bound together by the love of Jesus Christ, we, like our Lord, must have compassion for one another. That's an important part of living in a faith community. Yes, we can honor one another and affirm one another in the loveliness we see in one another—those times when we see gifts and talents and Christ-like ways that we know are Spirit-born and Spirit-driven. But that's the easy part of community life. We also need to be able to follow our Lord and participate in his ministry by daring to visit the unlovely in each other—caring for one another in our hurts and troubles, weaknesses and flaws. For to visit the unlovely in each other in the name of Christ is to bring healing and life to our sisters and brothers here. And how lovely that can be. **AMEN.**