

"The Biggest Thing"

Tim after Pentecost – Lectionary 10
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, June 6, 2010 – 8:15 a.m.
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 7: 11-17

Did you hear the one about the young minister who was asked one time to preside at a graveside funeral service for a homeless man who had died while traveling through his town? The funeral director had made arrangements for the burial at a new cemetery way back in the country outside of town. This homeless man would actually be the first person placed there.

As he was not very familiar with the back woods area, the young minister soon became hopelessly lost and ended up arriving over an hour late. He saw the backhoe by the grave and noticed that the crew was eating lunch under a nearby tree, but the hearse was nowhere to be seen. He apologized to the workers for his tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where he saw the vault lid had already been put in place. The young preacher assured the vault crew he would not hold them long, but doing the service was the proper thing to do. The workers gathered around still eating their lunch. The young preacher poured out his heart and soul in that service. That young fellow preached and preached like he was possessed by the Spirit. He finally closed the lengthy service at last with a prayer and began to walk to his car. He felt he had done his duty to the homeless man, and that the crew would leave with a renewed sense of purpose and dedication, in spite of his tardiness.

As he was opening the door and taking off his coat for his ride back into town, he overheard one of the workers say to the other, "I ain't never seen anything like that . . . and I've been putting in septic tanks for over twenty years."

Did you ever notice that we sometimes laugh about those things that make us uncomfortable? Woody Allen once said something to the effect that few people are able to whistle a tune while pondering their own mortality. And my hunch is he is probably right. As they say, two things in this life are inevitable: death and taxes. The Bible doesn't have any good news about the later, but it does have something to say about the former. In fact, we just heard read two very similar stories about death, so similar in fact that Biblical scholars believe that Luke used the Elijah story as the model for his story about Jesus and the funeral procession in Nain. So, we'll examine the Lukan account this morning in an attempt to learn something new and enriching for our faith about God's grace and love.

At first hearing, this story reads like a bad news story on top of a bad news story on top of a bad news story. It begins with the sadness of a death, "A man who had died was being carried out," reads verse 12.

So, the bad news begins with the announcement of a death. It continues when Luke tells us that the man was young. In those days, as in our own, the death of a young person was always considered a tragedy. And as if this wasn't bad news enough, we learn that this young man was the only son of his mother. For you and me the loss of a child is bad enough, but the fact that this was an only child just compounds the pain,

made more so by the times in which this happened. This son had been destined to take care of his mother in her old age. She had no retirement fund; pension plan; no social security. She had only one son, and now he was gone.

Luke casts the final blow when he concludes the bad news portion of this story with the disclosure that the woman was already a widow. She'd known death and loss and pain and tragedy before. Now she was all alone. Who would support her? Who would care for her? She had now become one of the "expendables" in her society. Without a husband and now without a son, she has lost her status and most likely her sole source of support. This all added up to a life now of poverty, hunger, disease and, most likely, an early grave for herself.

Enter Jesus to this poignant scene. Let me make a few simple, short observations before we get to the heart of the matter. Notice, there is no indication that Jesus was summoned or that the expectation of what he was about to do was asked or even begged for.

Let's also acknowledge that we all know the tragedy of death, what St. Paul calls the "sting of death," and that this story awakens in us the emptiness and pain we may all have known. I know a seminary professor, now retired, who taught pastoral care in one of our Lutheran seminaries, and he had a favorite exercise with students. He was fond of asking students in his counseling class this question: "What can you know about a perfect stranger the moment you meet?" After a round of wrong guesses, he would share his insight, "You can bet that the stranger has lost something." That person has just lost a job, a promotion, a loved one, a home, a relationship, their health, their zest for living, or their God. Whatever it is, you can bet that the stranger has lost something.

Too pessimistic an outlook, you say? Surely people have also known joys in their life. Why focus so much on the losses instead of the gains? Here's why. He wanted his students to focus on the downside rather than the upside of life because he knew that's the way we become more sensitive and compassionate as people and as future pastors. That's how we learn to understand what others are going through. If you want to train people for ministry, there is not a better way to approach others than with an eye and an ear to their losses and pain.

So, the story before us today reminds us of our humanity – of the losses we all have known and will know, and of the pain such losses bring that none of us can nor should escape. It's what makes us human, vulnerable, caring, and supportive to one another.

One other quick observation – this is not really a story about faith, not even a little faith. As I mentioned a moment ago, there is no indication that Jesus was summoned by the widow to be there and to do his thing. But neither is there any indication that the faith or lack of faith of anyone there would make a difference in the outcome.

So, here's the key to this story, and it's summed up in verse 13: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her." That is such a profound statement that we often miss it as we rush to the miracle-side of the story.

Jesus' compassion is the essence of his lordship over this world and over us. Not judgment; not punishment; not indictment for our behaviors and the wrongs we so

easily do; but compassion. This word for compassion in scripture has its roots in the word "womb." To be compassionate is to feel and care for another's pain in a deeply visceral way. To experience someone else's compassion is to feel deeply understood, not only from that person's mind, but also from their gut.

Jesus' compassion, as we hear today, even has the power to bring life to the dead. To trust Jesus' and his word is to trust his compassion, and (there is more) it is to hear that word "compassion" as our true vocation with one another in this world. It is interesting to me that when Matthew records his thoughts, he tells the followers of Jesus "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," whereas Luke records, "be compassionate as God is compassionate." That, I think, is the message of this story.

We are all called to be signs of God's love, care, and visitation among his people. This story, of course, foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus himself, and reminds us that death has no power over us because of the compassion of Jesus whose resurrection makes possible our and our loved ones' resurrections. The truth behind the miracles in scripture is always that God sees and cares for us.

Years ago a man was traveling by ship with his youngest daughter across the ocean. Earlier that particular Sunday he had preached a sermon about God's love on the ship. It had been a very difficult sermon to preach, because he was newly widowed himself.

So, he was standing against the rail of the ship, looking out at the vast and magnificent ocean, when his daughter asked him if God loved them as much as they had loved her late mother. "Of course He does," answered the father. "There is absolutely nothing bigger or more powerful and all-consuming than God's love for us. It's the biggest thing there is!"

The little girl wasn't satisfied with the answer and wanted to know exactly how big God's love was. Finally, her father with great tenderness said, "Well, look across the sea as far as you can. Look up and down and all around. God's love stretches around to cover all of that; above the blue sky and deeper than the deepest part of the ocean underneath us."

The little one pondered for a moment and then replied, "And to think Daddy, we're right in the middle of it."

Yes, my dear, we are. We're right in the middle of it.

AMEN.

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