

## Synod Assembly Sermon, June 5, 2016 – Luke 7:11-17

### Bishop James S. Dunlop

When you are a pastor, you have the frequent opportunity to ride in funeral processions. In Littlestown, where I served a congregation, it was not uncommon for the trip from the church to the cemetery to go through the center of town. As they do in many towns, the police would be there to stop other traffic, and cars in the procession would drive with their flashers on. And out of respect for the deceased, other drivers would stop and wait for the procession to pass. This is part of the code of conduct for funeral processions. It is incredibly rude for anyone to pull out into the middle of the procession, breaking the chain of cars following one another to bring mourners to the cemetery.

It seems that this aspect of life as humans has not changed in millennia – the solemnity of a funeral procession. This is exactly what is unfolding in Luke’s gospel that we heard today. A widow, a woman who has already lost her husband to death, is now on the way to the cemetery to bury her only son. The death of one’s own child is such a tragedy for anyone to experience, but in the social world of Jesus’ time, it was an unbelievably harsh tragedy.

You see, in a culture where women were provided for by the men in their lives, this woman, who has already lost her husband, has now also lost her only son, and thus her only means of support. There is no Social Security, there is no safety net. Nothing. She is now destitute. And in some ways she may herself be wishing for death to come for her as well. Yet arriving on the scene is Jesus, with his own parade of followers trailing behind him. These two processions meet right outside the city, and collide. Jesus comes upon the situation and he realizes immediately what is going on and he responds.

Luke describes it this way” “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.” The gospels are the story of Jesus. They are witnesses to the life of Jesus. Luke has written an orderly account so that we may understand who Jesus is. That is what he says in the prologue to his gospel – an orderly account to help us to understand who Jesus is. In this moment, for the very first time, Luke refers to Jesus as “Lord” for the first time in his gospel.

What do think of when you hear “Lord”? Some don’t even care for this title for Jesus because they believe it seems to connote: power, authority, control, even male domination. But look what our Lord Jesus feels.

What is the characteristic of this Lord that we follow? He has **compassion** for the widow. Lordship is compassion. A deep, gut-level concern for her; a gut-wrenching feeling about her plight. He has mercy on her. In an unjust society that cares little for women as people, the Lord cares deeply for her predicament. The Lord sees her. Isn’t that how Jesus is in the gospels? He notices the ones that everyone else ignores: the lepers, the widow, the slave, the mother-in-law, the wee tax collector. Jesus sees the invisible in the society, the ones whom others try to ignore.

Who do you think are the invisible in our society – the ones we would like to ignore or exclude? The homeless? The hungry? The poor? The transgender? The addict? The imprisoned? Those released from prison? Victims of domestic violence? Victims of racism? These are the kind of people Jesus engages. Should we do any differently?

In the gospel of Luke, there are two significant stories of people showing compassion – the Good Samaritan shows compassion to the man who was robbed and near death, and the “Crazy Father” of the Prodigal Son shows compassion for his lost son. Compassion: This is what Lordship is all about. The Lord we follow is primarily compassionate, full of mercy for those who seem invisible.

Now back to the story of the widow who has lost her son. Notice that Jesus does what seems to be exactly the **wrong** thing to do. Instead of standing back respectfully, he stops the procession and rudely inserts himself. You just don’t interrupt a funeral procession. **And** Jesus says to this widow, “Stop your crying.”

One of things you learn in pastoral care class at seminary is that you never tell a crying person to “stop crying” -- particularly someone who has lost a loved one. Crying is actually a normal, healthy way to express emotion, yes, even for men.

So after Jesus seemingly blunders the pastoral care he makes another gaffe – grabbing hold of the son’s bier, which is the board that the body is laid on. It is spelled “b-i-e-r” not “b-e-e-r.” If this was an Irish funeral, from my heritage, there might have been

beer, spelled “b-e-e-r.” But in any case a stranger touching the bier at a funeral is really a huge taboo.

This is simply a startlingly interruption. Everything is stopped in this moment. People are frozen in their tracks. Jesus’ followers are confused about why he would bother with such an insignificant funeral. The bier carriers wonder what this guy is up to and who he is. The widow is questioning who is this person inserting himself into her grief.

At that moment Jesus speaks to the dead man: “I say to you, rise.” The dead man suddenly and inexplicably comes back to life, and Jesus gives him to his mother. Raising from the dead? This is exactly what can happen with a great prophet. Everyone knows this because it’s the same thing that Elijah did, when he raised the young man from death and gave the child back to the widow of Zarephath – raising her son from the dead.

Please understand that this story is **not** about the dead man, but actually about the widow – this destitute woman. This moment that seems to throw her son’s funeral procession into chaos and interruption is actually a moment of grace, the unexpected gift of God’s unexpected and overwhelming love flowing out upon this child of God, to this invisible woman. God’s grace is startlingly wonderful.

Think about in your life when God’s grace has shined. Recall a moment when the world stands still briefly, and you realized that God has done something unexpected.

Here is such a time for me: In 1993 my dad was dying of cancer. For months I had driven every weekend from Pennsylvania to North Carolina to be with my folks. And I was exhausted. And I decided that I simply did not have the strength make the trip again. I was sharing this with a friend, Dave, with whom I worked. I was sharing my frustration, my desire to be with Dad as he was dying, and my own exhaustion.

A few hours later Dave came by and dropped a plane ticket on my desk. He said, “I had some extra frequent flyer miles and I got you a ticket to fly down to see your folks.” When I did not have the strength, God provided.

I was there the next day when my dad passed away. God's grace comes in unexpected, life-changing ways, in ways that we cannot imagine, in moments when the world stands still.

For the widow in the gospel story, what is the result of this grace that is bestowed on her? She receives from Jesus compassion, comfort and new life. The disciples, the people gathered around Jesus – they saw this life changing moment, and it was life-changing for them as well. At first, their reaction is simply awe.

In that moment they witnessed how God, in unexpected ways, has broken into life; and they can only stand in awe. Then they give thanks for what God has done. And they glorify God. They are in worship and thanksgiving for what God has done in this moment. This widow has had her life restored through the restoration of her son's life. Thanks be to God.

“God has looked favorably on God's people,” they say. Then they begin to tell everyone what God has done. The news of Jesus spreads throughout the country. The life-changing story of God's grace spreads throughout the country.

For those being ordained today at our synod assembly, and for all of us really, this story is instructive. We all will encounter the invisible people in life – the ones whom the world does not see, the ones the world chooses not to see. And we are called to compassion. We are called to walk with those who suffer – the poor, the homeless, those who endure hate and prejudice. We are called to be compassionate.

Now there is something that we are not called to do in stories like this one. It's connected to my complaint with the expression, “What Would Jesus Do?” W-W-J-D implies that we should always do exactly as Jesus did, except we are not Jesus. We cannot raise people from the dead.

Grace flows not from us, but grace flows from God. There will be moments in our lives when we will experience the interruption of God's grace, but we cannot simply bring it about. It is God's grace.

**BUT,**

We **can** respond as the disciples did in this moment. We can observe God's grace happening in our lives. We can be in awe of what God is doing in our lives. And we can and should give thanks and give glory to God – a God who is gracious and merciful, who sees those who suffer, who showers grace upon grace in ways that interrupt and change our lives, using our hands to change the world for those who suffer.

And now more than ever, we need to tell everyone what God has done. The news of what God has done **and what God is doing is doing** needs to be told. And we, as Lutherans, we need to stop being shy when it comes to talking about our faith. We need to be willing to share the good news of Jesus. We need to be willing to tell people what God has done and is doing in our lives every day! A God of compassion, who has compassion for the invisible in society, of and God's justice and desire for justice in our society. Of God's grace that flows, interrupting the lives of people in so many ways. This news needs to be spread throughout the world just as it was in Jesus' lifetime. We are the carriers of that message. The Lord sees those whom others choose to ignore, and the Lord is compassionate. The Lord brings the promise of new and eternal life. And we stand in awe and give glory to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

**Note:** Watch the sermon on our synod's YouTube Channel here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7Ej87q9SMo>