

“Roll Up Your Sleeves” – Luke 7:11-17 – Proper 5 – June 6, 2010

In our Gospel reading this morning Luke paints a heart-wrenching scene worthy of any great dramatic presentation. He presents us with a poignant moment, a tiny incident tense with irony and suspense and surprise. Come with me and enter into that moment: smell the palm trees hung with dates and the dust and the donkey dung. Feel the Mediterranean sun beating down in the still late afternoon. Hear the wailing and the weeping; feel the pain and unrelenting sorrow of grief tear at your heart, as the funeral procession winds its way out of the city gates, heading to the nearby burial caves so the body can be interred before sundown.

In most ways this is an ordinary funeral procession, like countless others that have gone before and will come after. But for those involved it is not ordinary – it is a tragedy, and worse. The one who has died has done so prematurely, in his youth, and with him has died all the hopes of his widowed mother. He was her only son, and thus her only source of food, and clothing, and housing, and social connections. Her grief is both the heart-wrenching grief of a mother who has lost a child, but in her society she has now lost even her source of living along with her son.

There is a large crowd in the funeral procession. Her son was well liked and respected, even she was well liked and respected. But life is life, and she will soon lose those supporters as well. A few will stick by her, but most will move on, and they will find convenient ways to avoid her as she is reduced to begging for alms to buy food, will turn away as she throws herself on the mercy of the temple food bank and community breakfasts. She has lost a son, but she has lost a whole lot more, because she has also lost with him her very way of existence.

Things haven't changed a whole lot in that part of the world – or for that matter in our part of the world either. Sadly there are still far too many tragic funeral scenes today that mirror the one in Luke's gospel. Some are set in the same location, and feature the same sandstone city gates opening onto irrigated and parched desert fields. Places like Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Afghanistan and Iraq of course come immediately to mind, and while Western news media like CNN is either reluctant to show or perhaps even ordered by their own government not to show such funeral processions, the background scenes are familiar. Other places where such sad processions occur all too often don't get any media coverage either because of lack of world interest – places like Somalia, Sudan, Angola.

Sadly life is all too full of such devastating events. Sadly those who feel a sense of hopelessness in the midst of such suffering are all too often justified. The consequences of the deaths of primary breadwinners – like the AIDS orphans in Africa – still have an undue impact on families around the world, just like those on the widow of Nain in Luke's gospel. Widows and children, orphans and aged are all reduced to circumstances many had never even considered – reduced to the charity of the community and to begging for the essentials of life.

But Luke's scene shows us something more than just the tragic and sad funeral procession. Coming toward the funeral party is quite a different group, this one heading the opposite direction – into town. Where the widow of Nain is just beginning a difficult and perilous journey into aloneness, this other party is reaching the end of their dusty travels and they are anticipating being surrounded by people in the town. This second happier group is of course that of Jesus and his followers, approaching their destination and with the city gates in sight. There is a sense of urgency for both groups, for just as the funeral party has sundown as a deadline for the interment, so too Jesus and his followers need to enter the town before the gates are closed for the night.

We can watch from a distance as these two groups approach each other, like two clusters of ants on a pathway. But Luke forces us to follow him as he brings the focus in tightly first on

the crowd accompanying the widow, then on the widow herself, and finally to a full-face shot of Jesus. And there we see the intense passion Jesus feels for the woman – the word that in the bland and Victorian-style polite English translates as “had compassion” instead in the Greek carries the sense of visceral gut-wrenching emotion. Wracked and torn with that kind of intense empathy and compassion, Jesus breaks all rules of propriety and even religion, and consoles the widow. “Do not weep”, he tells her. She must have thought this dusty, travel-weary stranger was crazy. Dehydrated, maybe, from his long walk. “Do not weep.” Did he not have any clue as to how her world had just come totally apart? Did this stranger have no understanding at all of death and what it did to life?

And then the stranger did something no self-respecting Jew would ever do unless absolutely necessary – he rolled up his sleeves and touched the coffin. Mere hours before supper, in a profound act of hands-on ministry he defiled himself by touching the coffin containing a body. Did he have no understanding at all of the rules of the living regarding the effects of death?

In a shocking move that stunned the entire crowd, Jesus showed that he understood death and life very well. In what must have seemed like complete lunacy to everyone in the funeral procession, he began talking to the corpse. Talking not in the way that people do in funeral homes, for example – and there are some pretty bizarre things said in those situations – but instead Jesus spoke to the dead young man just as if he could hear him. Jesus ordered the young man to get up.

And if that wasn’t weird enough for the crowd, the next event had to push them right over the edge, because not only did the young man sit up, he began to speak. I for one would love to know what he said, but we aren’t privy to those words, for Luke moves right on to tell us that Jesus gave her son back to his mother. We don’t have her reaction either, but it doesn’t take a whole lot to imagine the wonder, the awe, the relief, the sheer joy she felt. As for the rest of the crowd, they were naturally enough totally terrified. They did however understand that they had just witnessed the great power of God present and alive in this strange man on the road, and they appropriately gave thanks and glorified God. Even more naturally they blabbed about this incident to everyone they met, so that it became known throughout that area – and caught the attention of another strange man, John the Baptist – but that’s going on too far ahead.

What a wondrous metaphor this little story is for our own times and lives. Some of us have already experienced the kind of darkness and despair that the widow of Nain was living. Most often that darkness and despair has involved death of some sort – perhaps the actual death of someone, but quite possibly the same kind of grief that comes from losing the love of someone close. Perhaps it was a desperate financial situation brought on by forces external and uncontrollable. Maybe it was being overtaken by the forces of addiction. Whatever the reason, or the specifics, some if not many of us have already experienced darkness and despair. For those who have not yet experienced such times of trouble and distress, it is quite possible that at some point in your lives you will share this experience also.

That is why the significance of the power of Jesus in this story is so relevant to our own lives. A power sufficient to overcome any trouble or distress, even death as he showed not only here but in rising again victorious over even his own death. Jesus clearly displayed the power of God at work in him, that he was indeed a prophet among prophets, even the Son of God.

Does his power mean that our lives will be trouble-free? Are we to understand that nothing disturbing or challenging or depressing will come our way? I don’t think so, because I believe that this miracle story actually touches us where we really live. Jesus’ presence didn’t

keep the widow free from a dark time, but his power most surely lifted her out of her darkness. At some point in the future either the son would bury his mother or the mother would once again walk in a funeral procession for her son – but either way they were both lifted out of this time of darkness and restored to a fuller life.

That is the underlying power of this story for our lives – the power of hands-on ministry to change peoples' lives, to lift them up out of times of darkness and despair. The simple act of a pause in our own busy journeys, the touch of a caring hand, a word of compassion, are all powerful ways we can convey the same love and compassion that Jesus showed. A pleasant smile along with a pancake or two at the breakfasts; a congenial “thank you” to someone who has offered to help; a free Saturday scrubbing windows, climbing ladders, pulling weeds; a loaf of bread offered freely – these are just a few of the many ways it is possible for us to roll up our sleeves to pass on the love of God in Christ with which we have been blessed.

And always in the background there is the reassurance that Jesus will be with us to lift us up out of times of darkness and despair, and to restore us to fuller lives. It is a promise not only of support when we need it, but a reassurance that even death is not the final answer, that in Christ God has truly given us the gift of life eternal, that we can eventually look to a time where there will be no more tears and no more sorrow, as we rejoice continually in the presence of those we have loved and celebrate with them in the presence of Christ our Lord.