

Rev. Jason Zirbel
Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
Texts: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Luke 7:11-17
October 1, 2017

Compassion and Chaos

Jesus Christ is the Lord of Life. *No objections, right?* We see this in spades in today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons. In both accounts, the dead son is raised and returned to the grieving mother. The dead are raised to life. Death no longer has dominion. This is certainly reason to rejoice. This is what we confess. This is our hope; our joy; our celebration...*even in the midst of sorrow and grief.* We do believe and confess and hold fast to the sure and certain hope of the resurrection that will happen when Christ returns in all His glory.

But...such celebratory resurrection joy necessarily means that something tragic and sorrowful has *already* taken place. Before the widows could celebrate these resurrections, the boys had to die. Like I always say around Holy Week time, when many Christians like to go right from celebrating Palm Sunday straight in to celebrating Easter Sunday: You can't get to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday. You can't get to the empty tomb without going through the bloody cross of Golgotha, although many Christians try, doing their best to avoid the scandal that is the cross of Jesus. They prefer not to mourn or grieve. It's too much of a downer. It's not "fun" or "joyous." Good Friday...what a killjoy! They prefer to have their Palm Sunday hosannas roll right into Easter Sunday alleluias, skipping over and avoiding all the grief in between.

I know this probably seems like a no-brainer to some of you; something not worth focusing on. "*Of course the two boys were dead. That's why they were resurrected! Duh!*" Okay...but **WHY** were they resurrected? You can't simply say that they were resurrected simply because they were dead first. *That's true, but that's not really the point.* Lots of people are dead, and they haven't been resurrected... yet. (They will be, but it hasn't happened yet.) **WHY** did Jesus resurrect this boy? **WHY** did God, working through Elijah, resurrect that widow's only son from the dead?

Before you answer, keep in mind that the widow of Zarephath (an unbelieving region of Sidon...not a good place) had *already* been living a miracle for many, many days. The prophet Elijah had been staying with her and her son during a terrible famine, and she took care of him, feeding him bread that had been made from a seemingly *bottomless* flour jar and *unending* supply of oil. In fact, the Lord Himself assures Elijah *before* Elijah ever shows up on this lady's doorstep, "*I have already commanded her to feed you. Go.*" The widow herself acknowledges this when Elijah calls to her to bring him some bread to eat. "*As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing made. Just a handful of flour and a tiny bit of oil. I'm gathering sticks right now to go home and cook this last little morsel for my son and I, and then we'll die.*" She knew Elijah's God. *He wasn't her*

God...not yet, at least. He was Elijah's God...but she knew of Him. Elijah hears her sad response, and he comforts her with God's promise. *"Do not fear. Go back and make the bread for you and your son, but first bring me a little cake, and then you can go about your daily tasks. For God has promised, 'The jar of flour will not be spent, and the jar of oil will not be empty until the Lord sends rain upon the land.'"* **So the woman hears and obeys.** The text tells us that everyone in her household ate for many days.

Now think about this. She had been living on—sustained for many, many days—by the miracle that God's Word and Promise had wrought for her in her hearing and her presence. You would think that this would have some sort of **powerful effect** on her in terms of coming to faith. You would think that such a life-giving miracle of undeserved mercy and goodness would make her clamor to hear **more** about this living God of Israel; the God of Elijah. **But...it didn't.**

How can I say such a thing? Easy. When did she **finally** recognize Elijah's God as Lord? When did she **finally** recognize that the Word Elijah spoke—God's Word—was Truth (singular, as in the *only* Truth; not merely a truth among many truths)? She speaks these words of repentant faith **only after her only son is raised from the dead.** And even before this confession took place, she had no problem **blaming** Elijah's God for the death of her son. *"What have you against me? You've only come to shove my sins in my face and punish me!"* It took the death of her son to get her attention. It took the death and resurrection of her son to **finally** open her eyes and ears of faith to recognize the Truth of Life and Love in her presence, reaching out to her and her household.

The same can be said for the widow of Nain when Jesus raises her only son from the dead. The text tells us that Jesus had **compassion** on her. I think we've all lost someone close to us, but I know for a fact that some of you here today know EXACTLY what this mother was feeling. You know the pain of losing a son. You know the pain of burying your child. **Can your faith be shaken during these terrible times? Absolutely!** In fact, it can be very difficult to believe in the power and compassion and love of God when you've just been brought so very low. *"Why, God? What have I done to deserve this?"* I'm reminded of an article I read this past week about an inscription that was recently discovered in one of the infamous Nazi concentration camps of WWII. Some poor Jew carved into the wall of their cell, *"If there is a God, He will have to ask for my forgiveness."* I don't think anyone of us has ever felt that low, but no one here can deny that we haven't at least **doubted or questioned** the wisdom of God. No one here can deny that we haven't felt at least a little **undeserving** of the misery we're having to endure. No one here can deny that we haven't at least looked to God and wondered **why we're being punished.**

Why did Jesus raise the widow's son? Answer: Because He had compassion on her. *That doesn't mean that He merely felt sorry for her.* No. He loved her. Her pain *splagnizomai'd* Him; that is, it tore His insides up. *It was a very visceral, heart-rending, loving feeling.* His divine compassion—His love—can't help but act. Jesus—God's love and compassion in the flesh—reaches out and stops this somber procession. The Lord of Life reaches out and touches the unclean; the dead...*out of His great compassion and love.* He reaches out and shows, not just the mom but everyone present, who is in charge. Death doesn't have the final say. *"I am the resurrection and the life."*

Luke tells us that the resurrection of this young man caused the whole crowd to erupt in praises of thanksgiving. They feared and glorified God as a result of this mighty sign and wonder. *"A great prophet has risen among us! God has visited His people!"* And this report, as Luke says, spread all throughout the surrounding region. EVERYONE was hearing about the Lord of Life and His compassion...all because of a funeral!

Does God work all things for the good of those who love Him? Even funerals? Even cancer? Even divorce and depression and chronic pain and illness and job loss and imprisonment? Yes! Now, I'm not going to get into the whole "God is NOT the cause of evil, but God does permit evil" thing. There's simply not enough time in the day. Besides, you know this already. But...maybe that's the whole point. We know the Truth of God's love and compassion...*and yet how often we forget.* How often we hit a few bumps in the road; we get knocked out of "cruise control," and then we lament and question and doubt, as if God made a *mistake*; as if God fell asleep at the wheel or lost track of us. It's easy to praise God's compassionate mercy and love when things are going great in life. It's quite another thing, though, to give thanks to God for all His undeserved benefits when you're being crushed under the weight of the cross you're bearing at the moment.

I don't know what struggles you're dealing with right now. We all have them. Maybe yours aren't as bad as others. Praise God! Maybe things are truly and honestly going great for you; not a worry in the world...right now. Hey... praise God! Maybe you've never felt worse. Maybe you've never felt more forsaken or all alone. *Praise God(?)* Whatever your situation may be, your reality—your Truth—before God is the same *no matter what.* Whether you're up or down, richer or poorer, in sickness or in great health...whatever, you are a sinner who needs saving. Apart from Christ, you, oh child of Adam, are dead in your sin. But...because of Christ, you are redeemed. Because of Christ and in Christ, you have been saved.

Look to this cross. Here is the compassion of almighty God, on full display for all the world to see. *It is finished, once and for all!* God so loved the world; God had so much compassion on this fallen and sinful and evil world, that He sent

His only-begotten Son to *trade places* with us; to take our place in death so that we may have everlasting life with Him in heaven. It's sad that it often takes something tragic to wake us up and get our attention; to get us lined out and turned around and focused on Christ. It's incredibly sad that we often don't recognize or acknowledge God's compassion and mercy until *after* the tragedy has struck. And even then, do we truly recognize it...*or do we blame God for it?* Do we recognize the compassionate love and mercy of God when our prayers and desires aren't being answered/met the way we want them to be?

Folks: Here is God's love and compassion, right here and right now...**ALWAYS**. And God didn't wait for you to cry out to Him before doing something about your sinful condition. God took the initiative. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While we were still dead in our sin, *Christ died and rose again for us*. His great compassion and divine love led Him to the cross to suffer our justly-deserved punishment, long before we even knew there was anything wrong. And this divine compassion *continues today*. It's not a "one and done" type of thing that happened one Friday a long time ago in a distant land, far, far, away. No! God's loving compassion still reaches out to you today, *His gentle touch calming and halting the chaos we call life*. He reaches out and gently stops us, assuring us, drying our tears. This is why we "sabbath." This is why we rest; so that God can serve us and comfort us and nourish us and heal us. It is finished, in Christ and because of Christ. Be at peace. No matter how bad things may seem, by virtue of our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, we belong to Him. Nothing and no one can ever take this away from us. The gates of hell will not prevail, so neither will cancer or depression or dysfunction or anything else...even death. We grieve, *but we grieve in faith*. We don't grieve like those who have no hope.

Folks: Here is Christ! *"Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body. This is My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin."* **You're not going to get this anywhere else in Greenwood today!** God has visited His people. God *still* visits His people. Here He is! The Lord of Life reigns and rules in our very presence. Here is our joy! Here is our reason to rejoice!

May this Good News; this Truth of God's unconditional compassion and mercy and peace, be witnessed in all that you say and do. May your report of this great and undeserved compassion *reach out and go out* to all those whom God brings you into contact with. May this Good News of God's compassion and love for you guard you and keep you in Christ, now and into all eternity.

AMEN