

Introduction

Pastor Jeff and I will speak now and then about topics that are coming up in our sermons – mostly it is me asking Pastor Jeff about certain ideas I am thinking about presenting. This past week I asked him if he had ever had a funeral and wedding on the same day. It turns out that he had, at least a few times over the years – a funeral at 10 am and a wedding at 2 pm. What a juxtaposition of emotion this must be: one in wedding finery full of the joy and anticipation of lives joined; while the other weighed down by grief and the mind-numbing sorrow of death.

Pastor Jeff said that in his circumstances the 2 groups never encountered each other on those days but I have been wondering how such an experience would be handled if the two groups – wedding and funeral - were to meet. How might such a meeting change the experience of the events themselves. The preciousness of life and its cycle of beginnings and endings held in tension and stark contrast between the two realities of celebrating and mourning.

It makes me think about our journey through life, with ample amounts of both.

Our gospel text for today gives us perhaps some indication of what such a meeting of contrasts might have been like, and it also gives us some insight as to where God positions himself in our struggles.

Body of Text

Two Groups Meet

Jesus and his followers had been in Capernaum, a fairly large, prosperous city to the north. Leading up to this, Jesus had been busy spreading the message of grace; that God’s mercy is for all people, especially for the poor, the hungry, the weak, and the excluded. In chapter 6 Jesus actually delivers his *Sermon on the Mount* (or in Luke, the *Sermon on the Plain*) to emphasize this teaching and then, while in Capernaum, in the verses just preceding our text for today, Jesus dramatically heals the Greek centurion’s slave (that was the gospel text of last week).

This seems the pattern of how Jesus wanted us to learn - he would *teach*, then *do*, then *teach*, then *do* – all to re-inforce what he was teaching. Jesus left *tensions* in his teaching, I think intentionally, which force us to dig deeper for meaning; to discuss with each other; to test out together our interpretations.

All this activity was drawing large crowds to Jesus, to hear his words, to witness his healings, to see what else he might do for them. This was an excited crowd, a happy crowd. I would say that it was a crowd that was celebrating the presence of Jesus among them.

Then Jesus (and his disciples, and this large group of followers) encounter another large group in the small town of Nain. This town is quite the opposite of the bustling city of Capernaum, and this group is not celebrating but is mourning the loss of a loved one. Jesus may even have heard them coming before seeing

them – the cries of the broken-hearted. Here we see this meeting of two opposing groups: one of celebration, one of mourning.

The Widow's Son

Our text names a woman a widow, who is now grieving her dead son. This loss would have been incredibly difficult on its own, for a woman to lose her son, but in this case it was even worse for her. By having lost her husband previously and now her son – that is, all the men in her life – she would have been considered a *nobody* in her world.

In those times people did not really know what to do with widows who had no sons. It was the men of the household who were the providers and held the status of the family, and the wealth. The church recognized this and had even appointed special deacons to care for these widows, as most were destitute and without status from this loss.

This widow must have felt totally alone - without her son and husband, and without prospects of making a decent living going forward. In fact, she looks just like the person Jesus had described in the previous chapter in his *Sermon on the Plain* – poor, hungry, excluded, and mourning. But Jesus had called these individuals *blessed*. How could this be so? She would have felt anything but blessed. She would have felt only deep, unrelenting, life-altering grief.

I think this story brings us to this place intentionally. I think this woman is experiencing something many of us have felt ourselves. Few of us have not felt the grief of the permanent loss of the death of a loved one. It seems too often here at Zion over the past half year I have attended the funerals of members of our community. They have been meaningful gatherings and important to do together, but always accompanied by gut-wrenching grief and sadness. It is difficult to feel in any way blessed during these times.

And then there is the death that is a metaphor for all the traps we set for ourselves in our lives, the death that is tied to human brokenness; something we all experience in our everyday lives.

In these forms of death, blessing seems a long way away.

The Compassion of Jesus

Here it was that Jesus met this grieving widow, and here is where Jesus meets us... he did not wait to let the funeral procession pass; he did not walk on the other side of the road; he did not avoid them in any way. Jesus walked toward them and with gushing compassion pleads with the woman not to cry. You can almost imagine that Jesus may even have reached out to touch her cheek while saying this – “don’t cry,” he says.

Here we see most clearly, perhaps as clearly as any other place in the gospels, that...“the infinite presence of God and our most intimate places that hurt...are one.” (James Finley) Jesus is right there joining the widow in her sorrow.

The Greek word used to describe the compassion he had for her (“*esplachnisthē*”) is a word that is deeper than the word *compassion* as we know it. It means being moved in one's guts; it is a visceral experience of another's loss.

Luke uses this same term two other times; once to describe what the Samaritan felt for the beaten man laying by the side of the road in the story of the *Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:33); and again he uses this term in the story of the *Prodigal Son* at the moment when the father sees the son returning home, broken and near dead. (Luke 15:20).

Jesus feels this sort of deep compassion for her - gut wrenching and narrative-joining compassion - and for us too. He joins us at the edge of our own inability to free ourselves from suffering; he permeates the fragmentation of our lives.

And we are all involved. The experience of death unites us in a very basic way; it attunes us to the central message of the gospel – that is, God's power over death. We all have wounds /we all die; and we will be healed /we all will be raised again. Standing in the place of death and at the edge of our suffering is the resurrected Christ and our future beyond the grave.

Jesus Raises the Boy

After asking the widow not to cry, Jesus walks up to the bier and lays his hand on it – it was not a coffin, as coffins were not used in the Middle East at that time among the poor; rather very often wicker baskets were used to carry the body to the grave. Jesus placing his hand on the bier would have been seen as a dreadful blunder, making the dead body ritually impure, but Jesus does it anyway.

He lays his hand on the bier and then simply tells the boy, “Young man I say to you, get up”. The boy rises and his life is restored; but the mother too is returned to her community, whole.

Jesus joined the widow precisely where she was in her life – in her grief – and he reorganized her dilemma. This is the message of grace; Jesus reorganizes *our* dilemma too.

A few weeks ago in my sermon on the Holy Trinity we heard that the essence of the Father is *creativity*; the essence of the Son is as *teacher* (to show us how to live); and the essence of the Holy Spirit is the *mystical presence of God* in our lives (living within each of us). *The essence of the Son is as teacher*. Jesus is teaching here, providing a template for us to follow in our own lives. How can we read this text and not believe that:

God does anything but weep with us in our losses;

That he stands firmly beside us with gut-wrenching compassion in our moments of sorrow; and

That his divine concern has the power to restore, to heal, and to renew what is broken in our lives.

I found it interesting that the mother does not respond to Jesus in this text – the author of Luke does not record her saying anything; and I think this is intentional too. Instead, the focus is on the crowd. Note that they do not say, “what about us; do that for me; raise my child (husband/wife etc.)” – something we also might be thinking.

Instead, they had experienced this event as if it had happened to themselves, to those they loved, and saw it as a gift to their communities - “A great prophet has appeared among us”, they said – the gift of God’s presence at the edge of their brokenness.

The Tension between Life and Death

The question for us to grapple with is *how we are to hold the indisputability of death in all its forms, which is always right in front of us, in such a way that we can also affirm the power of God over death; and all the while living life each day as a divine, generous, and incredible gift?*

This is the tension we live with – there is our physical death and our brokenness held up against God’s free gift of grace and his never-ending love for us. This tension surrounds all of life’s incredible, wonderful joys, yet also embraces us in our troubling, hollow sorrows.

There is amazing grace, of course, but then we are asked to live the sometimes trying, the difficult, and the honest relationship of faith, wrapped up in not knowing, in doubt, and in our wounds.

Ultimately, we are left with the prayer Jesus taught us, and are confronted with its statement, “thy will be done” – there is no path to God that is not first God’s path to us. *Thy will be done*; inviting us to join the prayer that life and death ‘be done unto us’, which is Mary’s prayer at the beginning and Jesus’ prayer at the end.

Conclusion

To conclude; what it seems this text teaches us today is God’s ultimate promise – that he is with us now, here, today, and always. He watches over our lives with a love that is full of a deep and visceral compassion.

God reaches out and touches our bier even as we are being carried away in our wounds; and God heals us - perhaps not always easy, pretty healing - but through a soothing balm of grace intermingled with the very real lacerations of our lives.

Right here today, and also sometime in the future, God is saying and will say to each one of us too, “Young man/young woman I say to you, get up”, and we too are raised and will rise in the same love and compassion that we are being held with right now through a grace that comes to us as an utterly free gift.

Death is not the end, death is not final word, death has no real power in our lives – really, this is true - death has no power over us.

God is beneath us, God is in front of us, God is behind us, God is above us, and God is within us.

God is with us in all things.

This is God’s promise to us from yesterday, to today, and forevermore.

Amen